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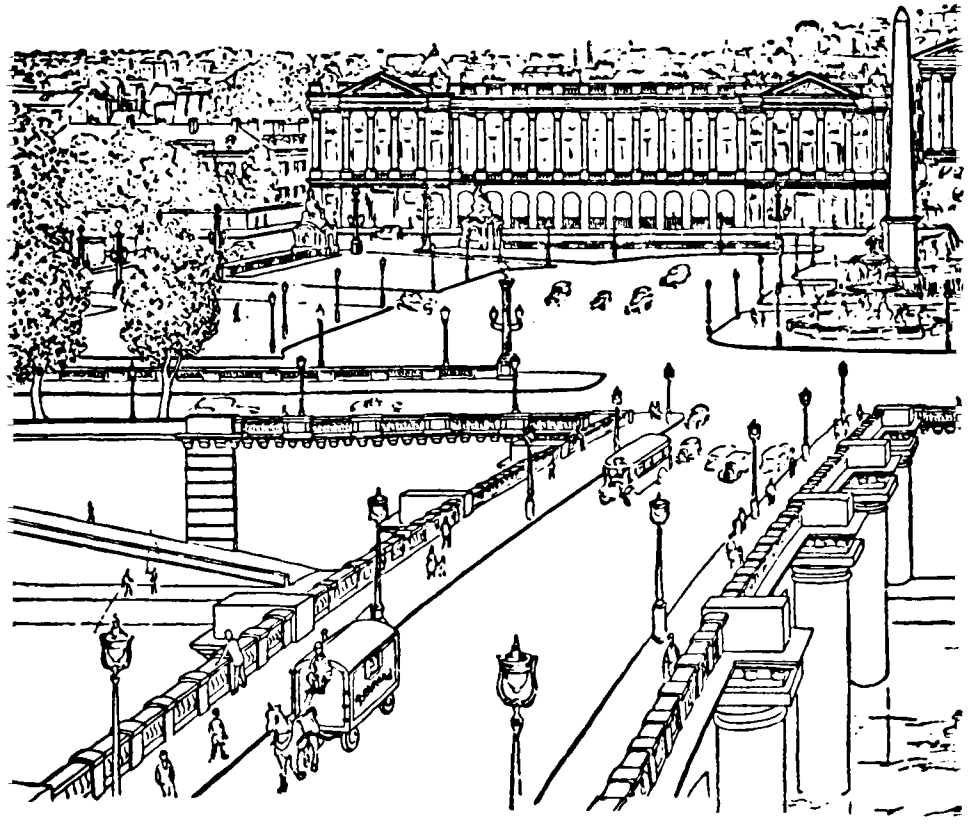

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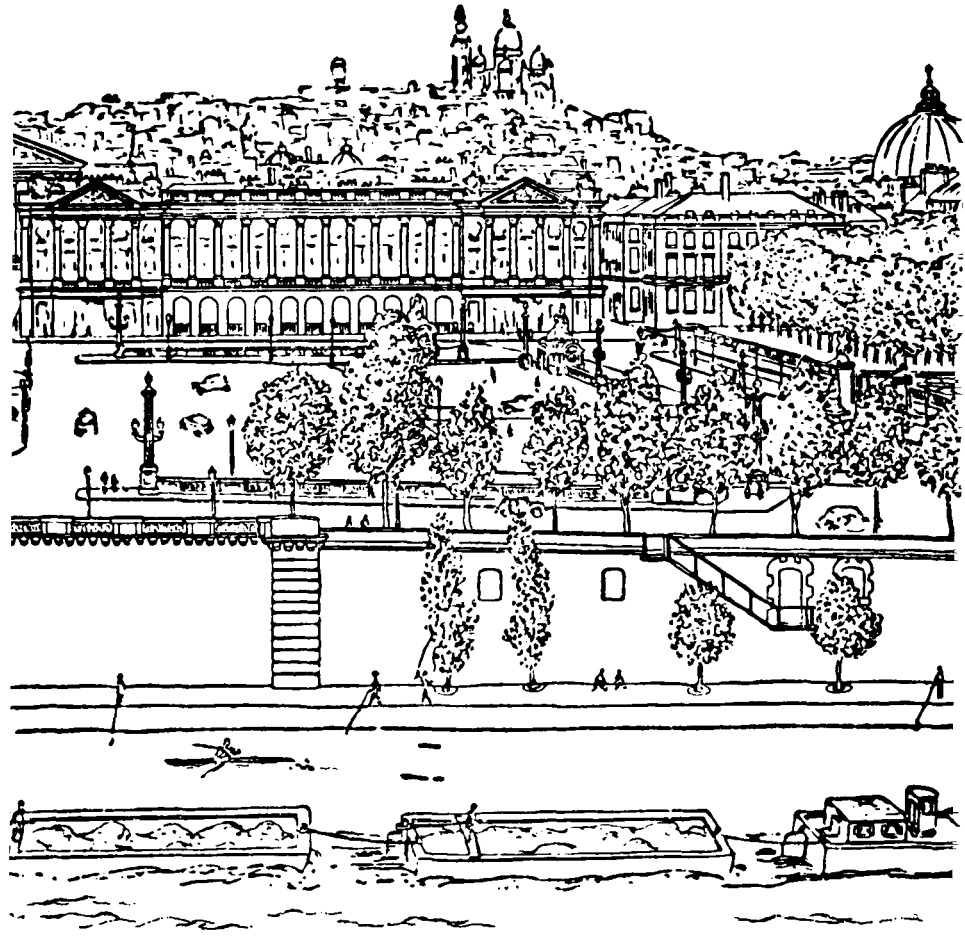

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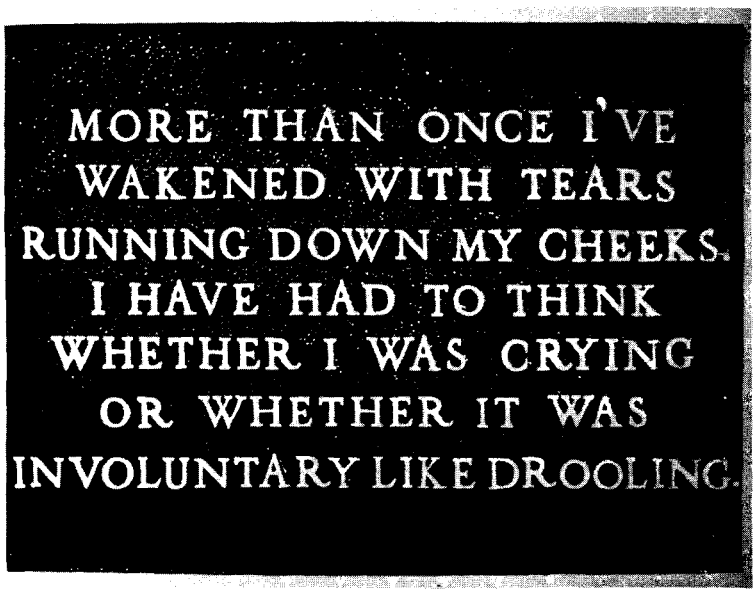

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Greasy Lake

T. Coraghessan Boyle

It's about a mile down on the dark side of Route 88.
—Bruce Springsteen

There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were all dangerous characters then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. When we wheeled our parents' whining station wagons out into the street, we left a patch of rubber half a block long. We drank gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird and Bali Hai. We were nineteen. We were bad. We read André Gide and struck elaborate poses to show that we didn't give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.

Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls, streetlights giving way to the thin streaming illumination of the headlights, trees crowding the asphalt in a black unbroken wall: that was the way out to Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters. Now it was fetid and murky, the mud

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banks glittering with broken glass and strewn beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the Air Force had strafed it. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets. This was nature.

I was there one night, late, in the company of two dangerous characters. Digby wore a gold star in his right ear and allowed his father to pay his tuition at Cornell; Jeff was thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop proprietor. They were both expert in the social graces, quick with a sneer, able to manage a Ford with lousy shocks over a rutted and gutted blacktop road at eighty-five while rolling a joint as compact as a tootsie-pop stick. They could lounge against a bank of booming speakers and trade "man's" with the best of them or roll out across the dance floor as if their joints worked on bearings. They were slick and quick and they wore their mirror shades at breakfast and dinner, in the shower, in closets and caves. In short, they were bad.

I drove. Digby pounded the dashboard and shouted along with Toots & the Maytals while Jeff hung his head out the window and streaked the side of my mother's Bel Air with vomit. It was early June, the air soft as a hand on your cheek, the third night of summer vacation. The first two nights we'd been out till dawn, looking for something we never found. On this, the third night, we'd cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in and out of every bar and club we could think of in a twenty-mile radius, stopped twice for bucket chicken and forty-cent hamburgers, debated going to a party at the house of a girl Jeff's sister knew, and chucked two dozen raw eggs at mailboxes and hitch-hikers. It was two A.M., the bars were closing. There was nothing to do but take a bottle of lemon-flavored gin up to Greasy Lake.

The taillights of a single car winked at us as we swung into

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the dirt lot with its tufts of weed and washboard corrugations: '57 Chevy, mint, metallic blue. On the far side of the lot, like the exoskeleton of some gaunt chrome insect, a chopper leaned against its kickstand. And that was it for excitement: some junkie half-wit biker and a car freak pumping his girlfriend. Whatever it was we were looking for, we weren't about to find it at Greasy Lake. Not that night.

But then all of a sudden Digby was fighting for the wheel. "Hey, that's Tony Lovett's car! Hey!" he shouted, while I stabbed at the brake pedal and the Bel Air nosed up to the gleaming bumper of the parked Chevy. Digby leaned on the horn, laughing, and instructed me to put my brights on. I flicked on the brights. This was hilarious. A joke. Tony would experience premature withdrawal and expect to be confronted by grim-looking state troopers with flashlights. We hit the horn, strobed the lights and then jumped out of the car to press our witty faces to Tony's windows: for all we knew we might even catch a glimpse of some little fox's tit, and then we could slap backs with red-faced Tony, rough-house a little, and go on to new heights of adventure and daring.

The first mistake, the one that opened the whole floodgate, was losing my grip on the keys. In the excitement, leaping from the car with the gin in one hand and a roach clip in the other, I spilled them in the grass—in the dark, dank, mysterious night-time grass of Greasy Lake. This was a tactical error, as damaging and irreversible in its way as Westmoreland's decision to dig in at Khe Sanh. I felt it like a jab of intuition, and I stopped there by the open door, peering vaguely into the night that puddled up round my feet.

The second mistake—and this was inextricably bound up with the first—was in identifying the car as Tony Lovett's. Even before the very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots ripped out of the driver's door, I began to realize that this chrome blue was much lighter than the robin's egg of Tony's car and that Tony's car didn't have rear-mounted speakers. Judging from their expressions, Digby and Jeff were privately groping toward the same inevitable and unsettling conclusion that I was.

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In any case, there was no reasoning with this bad greasy character—clearly he was a man of action. The first lusty Rockettes' kick of his steel-toed boot caught me under the chin, chipped my favorite tooth and left me sprawled in the dirt. Like a fool, I'd gone down on one knee to comb the stiff hacked grass for the keys, my mind making connections in the most dragged-out, testudinal way, knowing that things had gone wrong, that I was in a lot of trouble, and that the lost ignition key was my grail and my salvation. The three or four succeeding blows were mainly absorbed by my right buttock and the tough piece of bone at the base of my spine.

Meanwhile, Digby vaulted the kissing bumpers and delivered a savage kung fu blow to the greasy character's collarbone. Digby had just finished a course in martial arts for phys. ed. credit and had spent the better part of the past two nights telling us apocryphal tales of Bruce Lee types and of the raw power invested in lightning blows shot from coiled wrists, ankles and elbows. The greasy character was unimpressed. He merely backed off a step, his face like a Toltec mask, and laid Digby out with a single whistling roundhouse blow. . . but by now Jeff had got into the act, and I was beginning to extricate myself from the dirt, a tinny compound of shock, rage and impotence wadded in my throat.

Jeff was on the guy's back, biting at his ear. Digby was on the ground, cursing. I went for the tire iron I kept under the driver's seat. I kept it there because bad characters always keep tire irons under the driver's seat, for just such an occasion as this. Never mind that I hadn't been involved in a fight since sixth grade when a kid with a sleepy eye and two streams of mucus depending from his nostrils hit me in the knee with a Louisville slugger, never mind that I'd touched the tire iron exactly twice before, to change tires: it was there. And I went for it.

I was terrified. Blood was beating in my ears, my hands were shaking, my heart turning over like a dirtbike in the wrong gear. My antagonist was shirtless, and a single cord of muscle flashed across his chest as he bent forward to peel Jeff from his back like a wet overcoat. "Motherfucker," he spat, over and

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over, and I was aware in that instant that all four of us—Digby, Jeff and myself included—were chanting "motherfucker, motherfucker," as if it were a battle cry. (What happened next? the detective asks the murderer from beneath the turned-down brim of his porkpie hat. I don't know, the murderer says, something came over me. Exactly.)

Digby poked the flat of his hand in the bad character's face and I came at him like a kamikaze, mindless, raging, stung with humiliation—the whole thing, from the initial boot in the chin to this murderous primal instant involving no more than sixty hyperventilating, gland-flooding seconds—I came at him and brought the tire iron down across his ear. The effect was instantaneous, astonishing. He was a stunt man and this was Hollywood; he was a big grimacing toothy balloon and I was a man with a straight pin. He collapsed. Wet his pants. Went loose in his boots.

A single second, big as a zeppelin, floated by. We were standing over him in a circle, gritting our teeth, jerking our necks, our limbs and hands and feet twitching with glandular discharges. No one said anything. We just stared down at the guy, the car freak, the lover, the bad greasy character laid low. Digby looked at me, then Jeff. I was still holding the tire iron, a tuft of hair clinging to the crook like dandelion fluff, like down. Rattled, I dropped it in the dirt, already envisioning the headlines, the pitted faces of the police inquisitors, the gleam of handcuffs, clank of bars, the big black shadows rising from the back of the cell...when suddenly a raw torn shriek cut through me like all the juice in all the electric chairs in the country.

It was the fox. She was short, barefoot, dressed in panties and a man's shirt. "Animals!" she screamed, running at us with her fists clenched and wisps of blow-dried hair in her face. There was a silver chain round her ankle, and her toenails flashed in the glare of the headlights. I think it was the toenails that did it. Sure, the gin and the cannabis and even the Kentucky Fried may have had a hand in it, but it was the sight of those flaming toes that set us off—the toad emerging from the loaf in *Virgin Spring*, lipstick smeared on a child: she was

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already tainted. We were on her like Bergman's deranged brothers—see no evil, hear none, speak none—panting, wheezing, tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh. We were bad characters, and we were scared and hot and three steps over the line—anything could have happened.

It didn't.

Before we could pin her to the hood of the car, our eyes masked with lust and greed and purest primal badness, a pair of headlights swung into the lot. There we were, dirty, bloody, guilty, dissociated from humanity and civilization, the first of the Ur-crimes behind us, the second in progress, shreds of nylon panty and spandex brassiere dangling from our fingers, our flies open, lips licked—there we were, caught in the spotlight. Nailed.

We bolted. First for the car, and then, realizing we had no way of starting it, for the woods. I thought nothing. I thought escape. The headlights came at me like accusing fingers. I was gone.

Ram-bam-bam, across the parking lot, past the chopper and into the feculent undergrowth at the lake's edge, insects flying up in my face, weeds whipping, frogs and snakes and red-eyed turtles splashing off into the night: I was already ankle-deep in muck and tepid water and still going strong. Behind me, the girl's screams rose in intensity, disconsolate, incriminating, the screams of the Sabine women, the Christian martyrs, Anne Frank dragged from the garret. I kept going, pursued by those cries, imagining cops and bloodhounds. The water was up to my knees when I realized what I was doing: I was going to swim for it. Swim the breadth of Greasy Lake and hide myself in the thick clot of woods on the far side. They'd never find me there.

I was breathing in sobs, in gasps. The water lapped at my waist as I looked out over the moon-burnished ripples, the mats of algae that clung to the surface like scabs. Digby and Jeff had vanished. I paused. Listened. The girl was quieter now, screams tapering to sobs, but there were male voices, angry, excited, and the high-pitched ticking of the second car's engine. I waded deeper, stealthy, hunted, the ooze sucking at my sneakers. As I was about to take the plunge—at the very instant

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I dropped my shoulder for the first slashing stroke—I blundered into something. Something unspeakable, obscene, something soft, wet, moss-grown. A patch of weed? A log? When I reached out to touch it, it gave like a rubber duck, it gave like flesh.

In one of those nasty little epiphanies for which we are prepared by films and TV and childhood visits to the funeral home to ponder the shrunken painted forms of dead grandparents, I understood what it was that bobbed there so inadmissibly in the dark. Understood, and stumbled back in horror and revulsion, my mind yanked in six different directions (I was nineteen, a mere child, an infant, and here in the space of five minutes I'd struck down one greasy character and blundered into the waterlogged carcass of a second), thinking the keys, the keys, why did I have to go and lose the keys? I stumbled back, but the muck took hold of my feet—a sneaker snagged, balance lost—and suddenly I was pitching face forward into the buoyant black mass, throwing out my hands in desperation while simultaneously conjuring the image of reeking frogs and muskrats revolving in slicks of their own deliquescing juices. AAAAArrrgh! I shot from the water like a torpedo, the dead man rotating to expose a mossy beard and eyes cold as the moon. I must have shouted out, thrashing around in the weeds, because the voices behind me suddenly became animated.

"What was that?"

"It's them, it's them: they tried to, tried to. . . *rape* me!" Sobs.

A man's voice, flat midwestern accent. "You sons a bitches, we'll kill you!"

Frogs, crickets.

Then another voice, harsh, r-less, lower East Side: "Motherfucker!" I recognized the verbal virtuosity of the bad greasy character in the engineer boots. Tooth chipped, sneakers gone, coated in mud and slime and worse, crouching breathless in the weeds waiting to have my ass thoroughly and definitively kicked and fresh from the hideous stinking embrace of a three-days-dead corpse, I suddenly felt a rush of joy and vindication:

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the son of a bitch was alive! Just as quickly, my bowels turned to ice. "Come on out of there you pansy motherfuckers!" the bad greasy character was screaming. He shouted curses till he was out of breath.

The crickets started up again, then the frogs. I held my breath. All at once there was a sound in the reeds, a swishing, a splash: thunk-a-thunk. They were throwing rocks. The frogs fell silent. I cradled my head. Swish, swish, thunk-a-thunk. A wedge of feldspar the size of a cue ball glanced off my knee. I bit my finger.

It was then that they turned to the car. I heard a door slam, a curse, and then the sound of the headlights shattering—almost a good-natured sound, celebratory, like corks popping from the necks of bottles. This was succeeded by the dull booming of the fenders, metal on metal, and then the icy crash of the windshield. I inched forward, elbows and knees, my belly pressed to the muck, thinking of guerrillas and commandos and *The Naked And The Dead*. I parted the weeds and squinted the length of the parking lot.

The second car—it was a Trans-Am—was still running, its high beams washing the scene in a lurid stagey light. Tire iron flailing, the greasy bad character was laying into the side of my mother's Bel Air like an avenging demon, his shadow riding up the trunks of the trees. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp-whomp. The other two guys—blond types, in fraternity jackets—were helping out with tree branches and skull-sized boulders. One of them was gathering up bottles, rocks, muck, candy wrappers, used condoms, poptops and other refuse and pitching it through the window on the driver's side. I could see the fox, a white bulb behind the windshield of the '57 Chevy. "Bobbie," she whined over the thumping, "come *on*." The greasy character paused a moment, took one good swipe at the left tail light and then heaved the tire iron halfway across the lake. Then he fired up the '57 and was gone.

Blond head nodded at blond head. One said something to the other, too low for me to catch. They were no doubt thinking that in helping to annihilate my mother's car they'd committed a fairly rash act, and thinking too that there were three

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bad characters connected with that very car watching them from the woods. Perhaps other possibilities occurred to them as well—police, jail cells, justices of the peace, reparations, lawyers, irate parents, fraternal censure. Whatever they were thinking, they suddenly dropped branches, bottles and rocks and sprang for their car in unison, as if they'd choreographed it. Five seconds. That's all it took. The engine shrieked, the tires squealed, a cloud of dust rose from the rutted lot and then settled back on darkness.

I don't know how long I lay there, the bad breath of decay all around me, my jacket heavy as a bear, the primordial ooze subtly reconstituting itself to accommodate my upper thighs and testicles. My jaw ached, my knee throbbed, my coccyx was on fire. I contemplated suicide, wondered if I'd need bridgework, scraped the recesses of my brain for some sort of excuse to give my parents—a tree had fallen on the car, I was blindsided by a bread truck, hit and run, vandals had got to it while we were playing chess at Digby's. Then I thought of the dead man. He was probably the only person on the planet worse off than I was. I thought about him, fog on the lake, insects chirring eerily, and felt the tug of fear, felt the darkness opening up inside me like a set of jaws. Who was he, I wondered, this victim of time and circumstance bobbing sorrowfully in the lake at my back. The owner of the chopper, no doubt, a bad older character come to this. Shot during a murky drug deal, drowned while drunkenly frolicking in the lake. Another headline. My car was wrecked, he was dead.

When the eastern half of the sky went from black to cobalt and the trees began to separate themselves from the shadows, I pushed myself up from the mud and stepped out into the open. By now the birds had begun to take over for the crickets, and dew lay slick on the leaves. There was a smell in the air, raw and sweet at the same time, the smell of the sun firing buds and opening blossoms. I contemplated the car. It lay there like a wreck along the highway, like a steel sculpture left over from a vanished civilization. Everything was still. This was nature.

I was circling the car, as dazed and bedraggled as the sole sur-

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vivor of an air blitz, when Digby and Jeff emerged from the trees behind me. Digby's face was crosshatched with smears of dirt, Jeff's jacket was gone and his shirt was torn across the shoulder. They slouched across the lot, looking sheepish, and silently came up beside me to gape at the ravaged automobile. No one said a word. After awhile Jeff swung open the driver's door and began to scoop the broken glass and garbage off the seat. I looked at Digby. He shrugged. "At least they didn't slash the tires," he said.

It was true; the tires were intact. There was no windshield, the headlights were staved in and the body looked as if it had been sledge-hammered for a quarter a shot at the county fair, but the tires were inflated to regulation pressure. The car was driveable. In silence, all three of us bent to scrape the mud and shattered glass from the interior. I said nothing about the biker. When we were finished, I reached in my pocket for the keys, experienced a nasty stab of recollection, cursed myself, and turned to search the grass. I spotted them almost immediately, no more than five feet from the open door, glinting like jewels in the first tapering shaft of sunlight. There was no reason to get philosophical about it: I eased into the seat and turned the engine over.

It was at that precise moment that the silver Mustang with the flame decals rumbled into the lot. All three of us froze, then Digby and Jeff slid into the car and slammed the door. We watched as the Mustang rocked and bobbed across the ruts and finally jerked to a halt beside the forlorn chopper at the far end of the lot. "Let's go," Digby said. I hesitated, the Bel Air wheezing beneath me.

Two girls emerged from the Mustang. Tight jeans, stiletto heels, hair like frozen fur. They bent over the motorcycle, paced back and forth aimlessly, glanced once or twice at us and then ambled over to where the reeds sprang up in a green fence round the perimeter of the lake. One of them cupped her hands to her mouth. "Al," she called. "Hey, Al!"

"Come on," Digby hissed. "Let's get out of here."

But it was too late. The second girl was picking her way across

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the lot, unsteady on her heels, looking up at us and then away. She was older—twenty-five or six—and as she came closer we could see there was something wrong with her—she was stoned or drunk, lurching now and waving her arms for balance. I gripped the steering wheel as if it were the ejection lever of a flaming jet, and Digby spat out my name, twice, terse and impatient.

"Hi," the girl said.

We looked at her like zombies, like war veterans, like deaf and dumb pencil peddlers.

She smiled, her lips cracked and dry. "Listen," she said, bending from the waist to look in the window, "you guys seen Al?" Her pupils were pinpoints, her eyes glass. She jerked her neck. "That's his bike over there—Al's. You seen him?"

Al. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to get out of the car and retch, I wanted to go home to my parents' house and crawl into bed. Digby poked me in the ribs. "We haven't seen anybody," I said.

The girl seemed to consider this, reaching out a slim veiny arm to brace herself against the car. "No matter," she said, slurring the t's, "he'll turn up." And then, as if she'd just taken stock of the whole scene—the ravaged car and our battered faces, the desolation of the place—she said: "Hey, you guys look like some pretty bad characters—been fightin', huh?" We stared straight ahead, rigid as catatonics. She was fumbling in her pocket and muttering something. Finally she held out a handful of tablets in glassine wrappers: "Hey, you want to party, you want to do some of these with me and Sarah?"

I just looked at her. I thought I was going to cry. Digby broke the silence. "No thanks," he said, leaning over me. "Some other time."

I put the car in gear and it inched forward with a groan, shaking off pellets of glass like an old dog shedding water after a bath, heaving over the ruts on its worn springs, creeping toward the highway. There was a sheen of sun on the lake. I looked back. The girl was still standing there, watching us, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched.

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Two Poems by Daniel Halpern

Passing

Sometimes you called on those
you'd never know
to come with you in place
of those you loved,
and talked to them
and touched them
and let them close purely
for sadness, for sadness
you'd hold them,
and you'd let them go.

On A Little Theme

Sometimes when you're not thinking
what you think most common
goes beyond everything you've ever known,
like dreams that are of another language,
like the great sadnesses that go on and on
although you know there is nothing left to suffer.

Memory is servant to what needs remain.
And those days, when you think about it,
days out of all those that have already passed,
too much seems known, too much unknown.
And when you're thinking no longer,
everything comes back—those lost
and what has been forgotten or unknown for so long.

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Three Poems by Michel Deguy

translated by Raymond Federman

The wall is massive, of solid stone, hard, finished;
yet it oozes The wall is smooth, new and old, durable,
and yet it is crannied, and through the mute fault drips
a drop, a beast, a moss The wall performs its role,
it borders, blocks, separates, it hides, it obstructs,
and yet it has to do this, it protects, sustains the insect
100%, it laments, supports decision, is accounted for to
the bare bone, it pierces water, it has just allowed this
hand which inscribed to go through, it brings mortality
to mind: Here fell
Here lived
Here passed
Here died

• • •

A cup on a telegram
"when are you coming home?"
Dawn like a fine thread on
the labor of evening
"oh sweetness sweetness"
Face too bare I withdraw

But knowing that panic has a sense
the world in bulk dashes on the spot
so that with the simplicity of
an engraving we elect some lines
the simplest like those of
the basket-makers who weave
with the same reed different baskets

• • •

(When two poets come face to face
It would be better if they were
Two Turkish wrestlers in greased breeches
Birds of the same surprised sex
Who avoid each other like two metamorphoses)

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Two Poems by Tom Disch

Atocha Choo-Choo

(for John Ashbery)

The pie here doesn't taste
As though it were meant
To be eaten nor can I

Sir keep from the simple sweetness

Of seeming to mean
Something, the cheap
Shot of the easy

Deposit of block
A into slot
A, even as our train eases

Out of the station in a series

Of muffled collisions
Not so much discontinuous
As exhibiting a continuity

Apprehensible only to brake-
And signalmen, to whom
I might liken myself

At least insofar as I

Relates to U,
I.e., those signs above the two
Tracks between which we

Must soon choose.
Choose! Choose!

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The astonishing shoes not of

Spanish but

Chinese women zip by our window
Suggesting several possibilities,
To wit, 1) None

Of this is real and we are
Dreaming; 2) the
Chinese cultural attaché

Has assembled the members

Of a traditional
Chinese dance troupe here in the
Atocha station; 3) the more

Imaginative transvestites of
Madrid have hit upon
A new way to dramatize

Their estrangement from roles

Assigned to them by those who choose
Not to bind their feet; or,
Finally, 4) feet

Are to be thought
Of here in a prosodic sense
And these cruel

Chinese toeshoes represent

A needless tyranny—for see,
As the train picks up speed,
There are the happy natural toes

Of shepherds innocent all summer long

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Of shoes, toes
That seem to say to us

We must choose if not them then

What they stand for, the
Freedom—or tyranny,
It amounts to the same thing—of

Nature, that primordial progressive
Educationist, ur-Isadora,
Whom even the arch-

Augustan Pope commends as

The infallible modiste.
We follow her, then, as we follow
U track through the cold

Castilian countryside,
Bleak with furze
Of the high plateau.

This will be a long train ride.

Conclusive Evidence

(for James Merrill)

At last we have proof that can't be doubted—
A photograph, in fact!—that Life continues
Even when it's done and Identity endures
Unchanged through all Eternity. This photograph,
Which seems to show the silhouette of a willow
Leaf, was taken at the very instant
A spirit named Jim announced his presence
At a séance in the Ansonia Hotel.
(The medium through whom Jim spoke to us

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Has asked me not to reveal his name.)
The image of the seeming leaf only approximates
Jim's spiritual form: it is a kind of calling card
He leaves by way of saying he's been by,
Something palpable to our solid hands
And stolid imaginations. Lovely as it is,
It shrinks to insignificance beside
The facts he's revealed concerning the Other Side,
Which is not, as many of us may have feared,
In the present condition of Europe,
Spoiled by the crush of visitors, but a true
Aristocracy, the upper strata of which are reserved
(As Dante too has indicated) for the meritorious,
Those who can properly appreciate
The etheric equivalents of what is most precious
Here below: fine silver, rare wines, Olympic
Athletes, a command of the right tone.
Some of Jim's meanings must be inferred,
For his voice, though persuasive, is low,
But the dearest, sweetest, richest message
He brings from the Beyond is simply: Love.
We must all open ourselves to the influence of Love.
We must all let its fleshless fingers caress our skin.
We must cease to doubt and share our Love
With the avatars of Heaven's own upper classes
In their varied earthly guises—as, for instance,
Fair young men with thick moustaches
Vanishing into the IND; as a bottle
Of discreet cologne (scent being the most spiritual
Of the senses); as a rhyme that comes
With cosmic inevitability; as a silly,
Wistful lady in a rabbit coat (a friend inherited
From one's mother) who is believed to own
Most of a block of prime Manhattan real estate
And who is willing to listen half the night
To what our choicest spirits have to say.

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Portfolio

Left and Right Hand Devils

Joe Zucker

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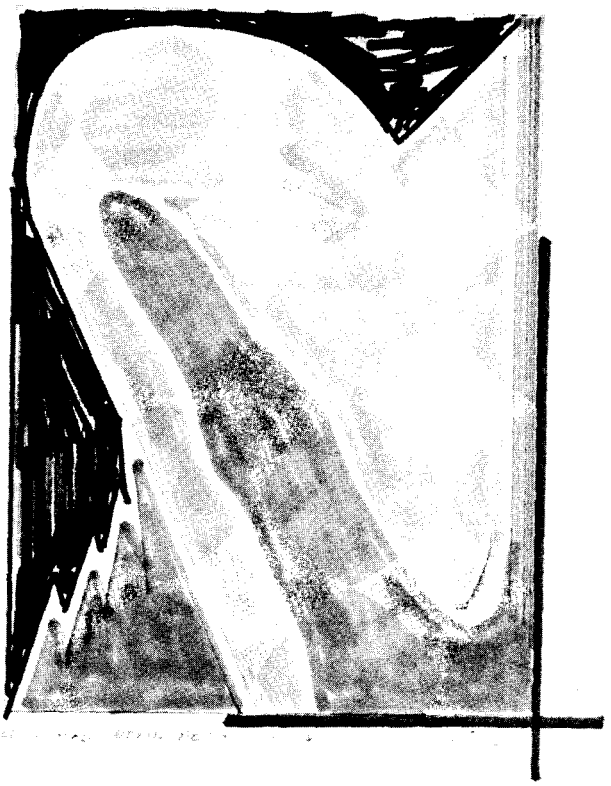

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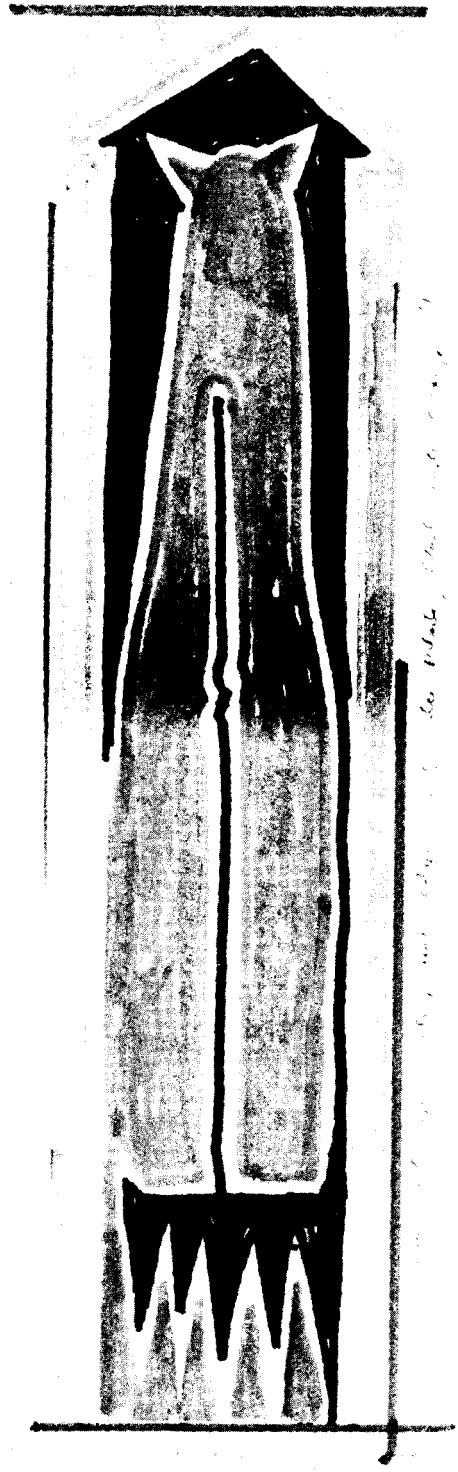

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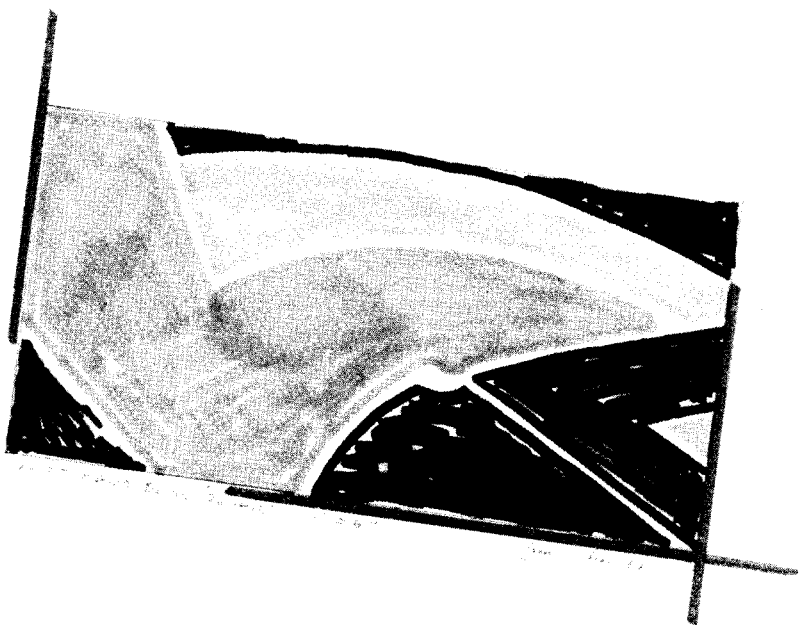

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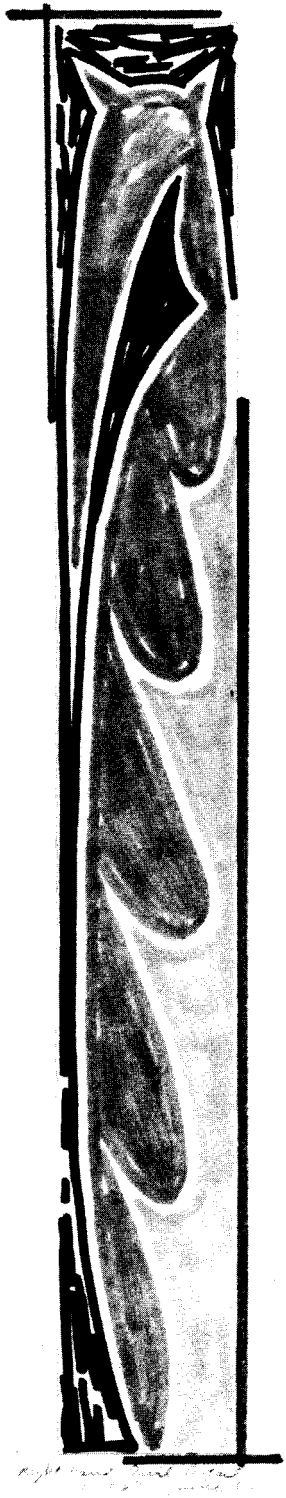

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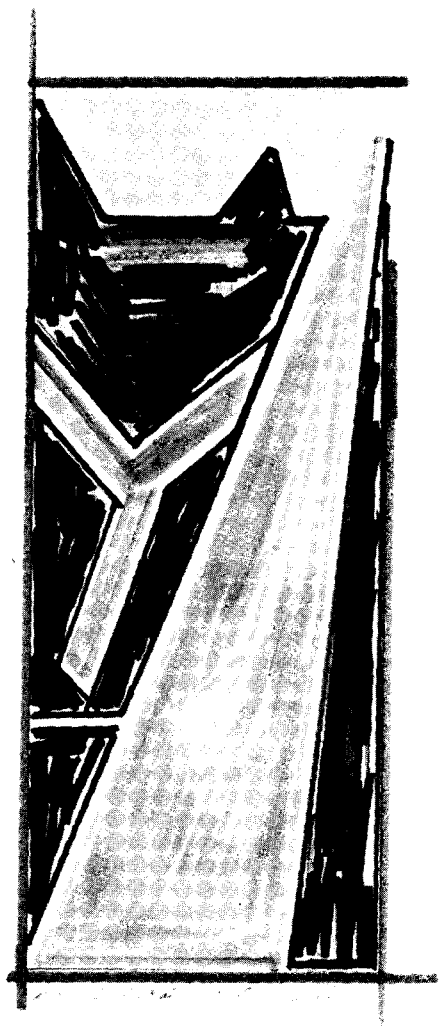

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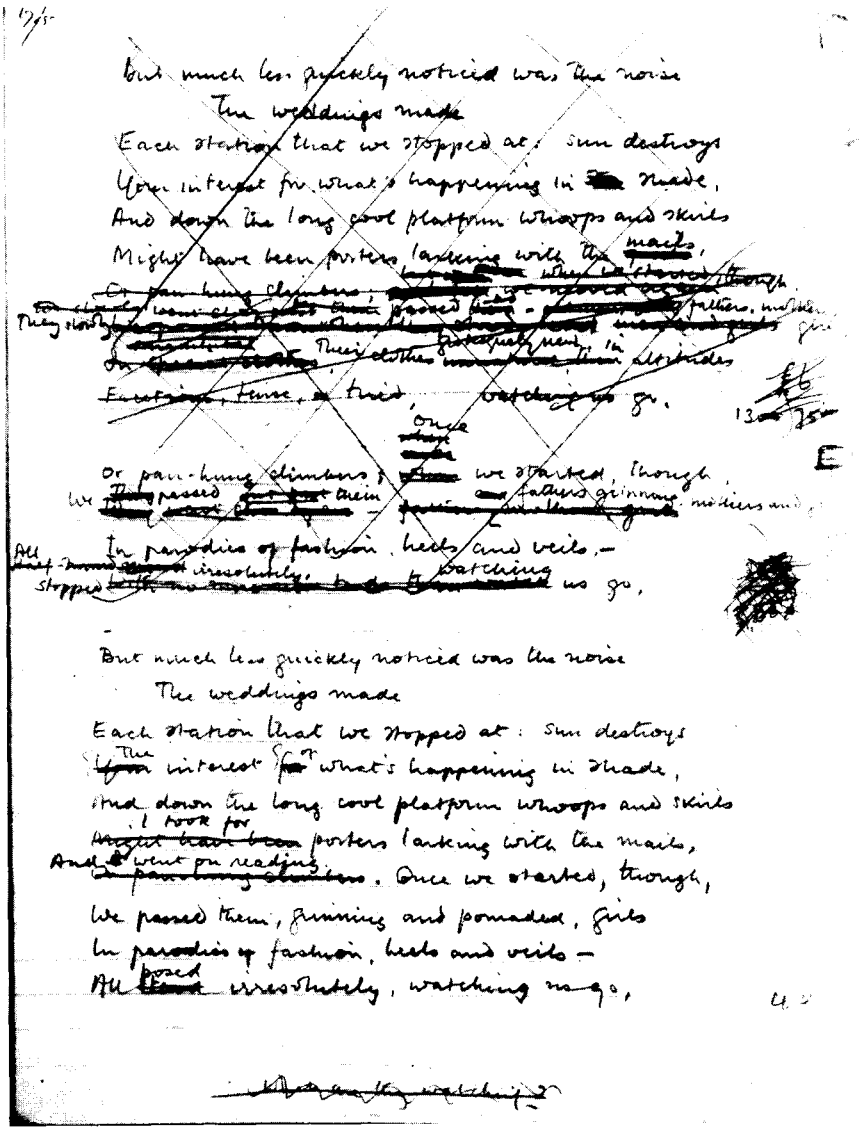

A Philip Larkin manuscript page from "The Whitsun Weddings."

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Fay Godwin

The Art of Poetry XXX
Philip Larkin

"Temperamentally and geographically remote," the Times Literary Supplement *wrote of Philip Larkin, "he has refused almost all invitations to judge, recite, review, lecture, pontificate, or to be interviewed."*

When the notion of securing a Paris Review *interview with Larkin arose, the staff was not sanguine. Much to our delight, Mr. Larkin consented warily, stating that he wasn't crazy about the idea, but that "the* Paris Review *series is, of course, known to me, and I can see I should be in good company." In the case of this interview, Mr. Larkin did not let down his guard sufficiently to be interviewed in person. He stipulated it be con-*

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ducted entirely by post: "You will get much better answers that way." He took nearly five months to answer the initial set of questions, stating, "It has taken rather a long time because, to my surprise, I found writing it suffocatingly boring."

His letterhead, P.A. Larkin, C.B.E., C.Lit., M.A., D.Lit., D.Litt., F.R.S.L., F.L.A., *is indicative of the measure of worldly recognition his relatively small output has received. Indeed, he has been called the* other *English Poet Laureate ("even more loved and needed than the official one, John Betjeman," according to Calvin Bedient in the* New York Times Book Review*). But Larkin transcends his Englishness, and is widely read on the Continent and in the U.S.*

Larkin was born in Coventry, Warwickshire, on August 9, 1922. He was educated at King Henry VIII School, Coventry, and St. John's College, Oxford, where he took both B.A. and M.A. The atmosphere at Oxford at the time could be inferred from his novel, Jill. *While an undergraduate, he knew Kingsley Amis and John Wain (though not at the same time), part of a group that came to be identified in 1954 as "The Movement." Their principal dedication seems to have been to revolt against poetry of excess—the rhetorical excess of Dylan Thomas and the cosmic excess of T.S. Eliot. Of The Movement poets included in the landmark anthology,* New Lines, *Larkin and perhaps Thom Gunn are best known today.*

After holding library posts in various U.K. libraries from 1943 until 1955, Larkin became Librarian of the Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, in Yorkshire, a post he holds today. When asked why he chose to become a librarian, he says, "A librarian is what you are when you have failed to do all the things you do want to do and have succeeded in avoiding all the things you don't want to do."

He also has had a lifelong interest in jazz. For ten years he was Jazz Feature Writer for the London Daily Telegraph. *His jazz columns are collected in the volume,* All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–68.

Philip Larkin's books of poems are The North Ship, *1945: revised edition 1966;* XX Poems, *1951;* The Less Deceived, *1955;* The Whitsun Weddings, *1964; and* High Windows,

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1974. In addition, Larkin has published two striking but very different novels, the aforementioned Jill, *1946: revised edition, 1964; and* A Girl in Winter, *1947. He edited* The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse, *1973.*

He has said his aim in writing a poem is "to construct a verbal device that would preserve an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read the poem." Philip Larkin is an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe your life at Hull? Do you live in a flat or own a house?

LARKIN

I came to Hull in 1955. After eighteen months (during which I wrote "Mr. Bleaney"), I took a University flat and lived there for nearly eighteen years. It was the top flat in a house that was reputedly the American Consulate during the war, and though it might not have suited everybody, it suited me. I wrote most of *The Whitsun Weddings* and all of *High Windows* there. Probably I should never have moved if the University hadn't decided to sell the house, but as it was I had to get out and find somewhere else. It was a dreadful experience, as at that time houses were hard to find. In the end friends reported a small house near the University, and I bought that in 1974. I haven't decided yet whether or not I like it.

INTERVIEWER

How many days a week do you work at the library, and for how many hours a day?

LARKIN

My job as University Librarian is a full-time one, five days a week, forty-five weeks a year. When I came to Hull, I had eleven staff; now there are over a hundred of one sort and

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another. We built one new library in 1960 and another in 1970, so that my first fifteen years were busy. Of course, this was a period of university expansion in England, and Hull grew as much if not more than the rest. Luckily the Vice-Chancellor during most of this time was keen on the Library, which is why it is called after him. Looking back, I think that if the Brynmor Jones Library *is* a good library—and I think it is—the credit should go to him and to the Library staff. And to the University as a whole, of course. But you wouldn't be interested in all that.

INTERVIEWER

What is your daily routine?

LARKIN

My life is a simple as I can make it. Work all day, cook, eat, wash up, telephone, hack writing, drink, television in the evenings. I almost never go out. I suppose everyone tries to ignore the passing of time: some people by doing a lot, being in California one year and Japan the next; or there's my way—making every day and every year exactly the same. Probably neither works.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't mention a schedule for writing...

LARKIN

Yes, I was afraid you'd ask about writing. Anything I say about writing poems is bound to be retrospective, because in fact I've written very little since moving into this house, or since *High Windows*, or since 1974, whichever way you like to put it. But when I did write them, well, it was in the evenings, after work, after washing up (I'm sorry: you would call this "doing the dishes"). It was a routine like any other. And really it worked very well: I don't think you can write a poem for more than two hours. After that you're going round in circles, and it's much better to leave it for twenty-four hours, by which time your subconscious or whatever has solved the block and you're

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ready to go on.

The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there. Another top-floor flat, by the way. I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. The first part of the evening had the second part to look forward to, and I could enjoy the second part with a clear conscience because I'd done my two hours. I can't seem to organize that now.

INTERVIEWER

Does, or did, writing come easily for you? Does a poem get completed slowly or rapidly?

LARKIN

I've no standards of comparison. I wrote short poems quite quickly. Longer ones would take weeks or even months. I used to find that I was never sure I was going to finish a poem until I had thought of the last line. Of course, the last line was sometimes the first one you thought of! But usually the last line would come when I'd done about two-thirds of the poem, and then it was just a matter of closing the gap.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you write, and for whom?

LARKIN

You've been reading Auden: "To ask the hard question is simple." The short answer is that you write because you have to. If you rationalize it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience. It doesn't feel like self-expression, though it may look like it. As for *whom* you write, well, you write for everybody. Or anybody who will listen.

INTERVIEWER

Do you share your manuscripts with anyone before publish-

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ing them? Are there any friends whose advice you would follow in revising a poem?

LARKIN

I shouldn't normally show what I'd written to anyone: what would be the point? You remember Tennyson reading an unpublished poem to Jowett; when he had finished, Jowett said "I shouldn't publish that if I were you, Tennyson." Tennyson replied, "If it comes to that, Master, the sherry you gave us at lunch was downright filthy." That's about all that can happen.

But when we were young, Kingsley Amis and I used to exchange unpublished poems, largely because we never thought they could be published, I suppose. He encouraged me, I encouraged him. Encouragement is very necessary to a young writer. But it's hard to find anyone worth encouraging: there aren't many Kingsleys about.

INTERVIEWER

In his *Paris Review* interview, Kingsley Amis states you helped him with the manuscript of *Lucky Jim*. What was the nature of that working relationship? Is part of that novel based upon your own experiences on staff at Leicester University?

LARKIN

Well, it's all so long ago, it's hard to remember. My general conviction was that Kingsley was quite the funniest writer I had ever met—in letters and so on—and I wanted everyone else to think so too. I know he says he got the idea of *Lucky Jim* from visiting me when I was working at University College Leicester. This has always seemed rather tenuous to me: after all, he was working at University College Swansea when he was writing it, and the theme—boy meets apparently nasty girl, but turns her into a nice girl by getting her away from nasty environment—is one I think has always meant a lot to Kingsley. He used it again in *I Want It Now*. When I read the first draft I said, Cut this, cut that, let's have more of the other. I remember I said, Let's have more "faces"—you know, his Edith Sitwell face, and so

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on. The wonderful thing was that Kingsley could "do" all those faces himself—"Sex Life in Ancient Rome" and so on. Someone once took photographs of them all. I wish I had a set.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to be a librarian? Had you no interest in teaching? What was your father's profession?

LARKIN

Oh dear, this means a lot of autobiography. My father was a City Treasurer, a finance officer. I never had the least desire to "be" anything when I was at school, and by the time I went to Oxford the war was on and there wasn't anything to "be" except a serviceman or a teacher or a civil servant. In 1943 when I graduated I knew I couldn't be the first, because I'd been graded unfit (I suppose through eyesight), nor the second because I stammered, and then the Civil Service turned me down twice, and I thought, Well, that lets me out, and I sat at home writing *Jill*. But of course in those days the government had powers to send you into the mines or onto the land or into industry, and they wrote quite politely to ask what in fact I was doing. I looked at the daily paper (the *Birmingham Post*: we were living at Warwick then) and saw that a small town in Shropshire was advertising for a librarian, applied for it, and got it, and told the government so, which seemed to satisfy them.

Of course, I wasn't a real librarian, more a sort of caretaker—it was a one-man library—and I can't pretend I enjoyed it much. The previous librarian had been there about forty years, and I was afraid I should be there all my life too. This made me start qualifying myself professionally, just in order to get away, which I did in 1946. By then I'd written *Jill*, and *The North Ship*, and *A Girl in Winter*. It was probably the "intensest" time of my life.

INTERVIEWER

Is Jorge Luis Borges the only other contemporary poet of note who is also a librarian, by the way? Are you aware of any others?

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LARKIN

Who is Jorge Luis Borges? The writer-librarian *I* like is Archibald MacLeish. You know, he was made Librarian of Congress in 1939, and on his first day they brought him some papers to sign, and he wouldn't sign them until he understood what they were all about. When he did understand, he started making objections and counter-suggestions. The upshot was that he reorganized the whole Library of Congress in five years simply by saying, I don't understand and I don't agree, and in wartime, too. Splendid man.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the academic world as a *milieu* for the working creative writer—teaching specifically?

LARKIN

The academic world has worked all right for me, but then, I'm not a teacher. I couldn't be. I should think that chewing over other people's work, writing I mean, must be terribly stultifying. Quite sickens you with the whole business of literature. But then, I haven't got that kind of mind, conceptual or ratiocinative or whatever it is. It would be death to me to have to think about literature as such, to say why one poem was "better" than another, and so on.

INTERVIEWER

We've heard that you don't give readings from your own work. In America, this has become a business for poets. Do you enjoy attending the readings of others?

LARKIN

I don't give readings, no, although I have recorded three of my collections, just to show how *I* should read them. Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, means you miss so much—the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end. Reading it on the page means you can go your own pace, taking it in properly; hearing it means you're dragged along at the speaker's own rate, missing

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things, not taking it in, confusing "there" and "their" and things like that. And the speaker may interpose his own personality between you and the poem, for better or worse. For that matter, so may the audience. I don't like hearing things in public, even music. In fact, I think poetry readings grew up on a false analogy with music: the text is the "score" that doesn't "come to life" until it's "performed." It's false because people can read words, whereas they can't read music. When you write a poem, you put everything into it that's needed: the reader should "hear" it just as clearly as if you were in the room saying it to him. And of course this fashion for poetry readings has led to a kind of poetry that you *can* understand first go: easy rhythms, easy emotions, easy syntax. I don't think it stands up on the page.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think economic security an advantage to the writer?

LARKIN

The whole of British post-war society is based on the assumption that economic security is an advantage to everyone. Certainly *I* like to be economically secure. But aren't you, really, asking about *work*? This whole question of how a writer actually gets his money—especially a poet—is one to which there are probably as many answers as there are writers, and the next man's answer always seems better than your own.

On the one hand, you can't live today by being a "man of letters" as easily as a hundred or seventy-five years ago, when there were so many magazines and newspapers all having to be filled. Writers' incomes, as writers, have sunk almost below the subsistence line. On the other hand, you *can* live by "being a writer," or "being a poet," if you're prepared to join the cultural entertainment industry, and take hand-outs from the Arts Council (not that there are as many of them as there used to be) and be a "poet in residence" and all that. I suppose I could have said—it's a bit late now—I could have had an agent, and said, Look, I will do anything for six months of the year as long as I can be free to write for the other six months.

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Some people do this, and I suppose it works for them. But I was brought up to think you had to have a job, and write in your spare time, like Trollope. Then, when you started earning enough money by writing, you phase the job out. But in fact I was over fifty before I could have "lived by my writing"—and then only because I had edited a big anthology—and by that time you think, Well, I might as well get my pension, since I've gone so far.

INTERVIEWER

Any regrets?

LARKIN

Sometimes I think, Everything I've written has been done after a day's work, in the evening: what would it have been like if I'd written it in the morning, after a night's sleep? Was I wrong? Some time ago a writer said to me—and he was a full-time writer, and a good one—"I wish I had your life. Dealing with people, having colleagues. Being a writer is so lonely." Everyone envies everyone else.

All I can say is, having a job hasn't been a hard price to pay for economic security. Some people, I know, would sooner have the economic insecurity because they have to "feel free" before they can write. But it's worked for me. The only thing that does strike me as odd, looking back, is that what society has been willing to *pay* me for is being a librarian. You get medals and prizes and honorary-this-and-thats—and flattering interviews—but if you turned round and said, Right, if I'm so good, give me an index-linked permanent income equal to what I can get for being an undistinguished university administrator—well, reason would remount its throne pretty quickly.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write poems? Was time a factor in choosing poetry over the novel form?

LARKIN

What questions you ask. I wrote prose and poems equally

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from the age of, say, fifteen. I didn't choose poetry: poetry chose me.

INTERVIEWER

Nicely put. Your last novel, *A Girl in Winter*—which is a small masterpiece—was published twenty-five years ago. Do you think you will ever write another?

LARKIN

I don't know: I shouldn't think so. I tried very hard to write a third novel for about five years. The ability to do so had just vanished. I can't say any more than that. . .

INTERVIEWER

Jill was written when you were about twenty-one, and your second novel only a year or so later. Was it your intention, then, to be a novelist only?

LARKIN

I wanted to "be a novelist" in a way I never wanted to "be a poet," yes. Novels seem to me to be richer, broader, deeper, more enjoyable than poems. When I was young, *Scrutiny* ran a series of articles under the general heading of "The Novel as Dramatic Poem." That was a stimulating, an exciting conception. Something that was both a poem and novel. Of course, thinking about my own two stories means going back nearly forty years, and at this distance I can't remember what their genesis was.

I seem to recall that *Jill* was based on the idea that running away from life, John's fantasy about an imaginary sister, might lead you straight into it—meeting the real Jill, I mean. With disastrous results.

A Girl in Winter, which I always think of as *The Kingdom of Winter*, which was its first title, or *Winterreich*, as Bruce Montgomery used to call it—well, that was written when I was feeling pretty low, in this first library job I told you about. It's what Eliot would call an objective correlative. When I look at it today, I do think it's remarkably. . .I suppose the word is

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knowing. . . not really mature, or wise, just incredibly clever. By my standards, I mean. And considering I was only twenty-two. All the same, some people whose opinion I respect prefer *Jill*, as being more natural, more sincere, more directly emotional.

INTERVIEWER

In your preface to the reprint of *Jill*, you say it is "in essence an unambitious short story." What is your definition of a novel?

LARKIN

I think a novel should follow the fortunes of more than one character.

INTERVIEWER

At least one critic has cited *Jill* as the forerunner of the new British post-war novel—the literature of the displaced working-class hero which spawned later works by Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, Keith Waterhouse, Amis and others. Do you feel a part of any of this?

LARKIN

I don't think so, no. Because *Jill* has none of the political overtones of that *genre*. John's being working-class was a kind of equivalent of my stammer, a built-in handicap to put him one down.

I'm glad you mention Keith Waterhouse. I think *Billy Liar* and *Jubb* are remarkably original novels, the first very funny, the second harrowing. Much better than my two.

INTERVIEWER

You're extremely modest. Wouldn't you say that an open assumption of the British sense of class is important to your work—*Jill, A Girl in Winter*, a poem like "The Whitsun Weddings"?

LARKIN

Are you suggesting there's no sense of class in America?

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That's not the impression I get from the works of Mr. John O'Hara.

INTERVIEWER

O'Hara overstated. Did you prefigure a shape to your two novels, or did they evolve? You've stated your mentors in poetry, especially Hardy. But who in fiction early on did you frequently read and admire?

LARKIN

Hard to say. Of course I had read a great many novels, and knew the mannerism of most modern writers, but looking back I can't say I ever imitated anyone. Now don't think I mind imitation, in a young writer. It's just a way of learning the job. Really, my novels were more original than my poems, at the time. My favorite novelists were Lawrence, Isherwood, Maugham, Waugh—oh, and George Moore. I was on a great Moore kick at that time: probably he was at the bottom of my style, then.

INTERVIEWER

A Girl in Winter reminds me stylistically of Elizabeth Bowen's fiction, particularly *The Death of the Heart* and *The House in Paris*. Is Bowen a writer you've also admired?

LARKIN

No, I hadn't read Elizabeth Bowen. In fact, someone lent me *The Death of the Heart* when *A Girl in Winter* came out—two years after it was finished. I quite liked it, but it was never one of my personal favorites.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the structure of *A Girl in Winter* for a moment: did you write it chronologically? That is, did you write "Part Two" first, then shuffle the pack for effect and counterpoint? Or did you actually conceive the novel as present-to-past-to-present?

LARKIN

The second way.

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INTERVIEWER

Letters are an important and integral part of both novels, as plot and as texture. Are you a voluminous letter-writer?

LARKIN

I suppose I used to write many more letters than I do now, but so did everyone. Nowadays I keep up with one or two people, in the sense of writing when there isn't anything special to say. I love *getting* letters, which means you have to answer them, and there isn't always time. I had a very amusing and undemanding correspondence with the novelist Barbara Pym, who died in 1980, that arose simply out of a fan letter I wrote her and went on for over ten years before we actually met. I hope she liked getting my letters: I certainly liked hers. I talk about our correspondence in a foreword I provided for the U.K. edition of her posthumous novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe your relationship with the contemporary literary community?

LARKIN

I'm somewhat withdrawn from what you call "the contemporary literary community," for two reasons: in the first place, I don't write for a living, and so don't have to keep in touch with literary editors and publishers and television people in order to earn money; and in the second, I don't live in London. Given that, my relations with it are quite amicable.

INTERVIEWER

Is Hull a place where you are likely to stay put? If so, have you as a person changed since the writing of the poem "Places, Loved Ones"—or is the speaker of that poem a *persona*?

LARKIN

Hull is a place where I *have* stayed. On my twenty-fifth anniversary, I held a little luncheon party for the members of my staff who'd been there as long as I had, or almost as long, and

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they made me a presentation with a card bearing the very lines you mean. *Touché*, as the French say.

INTERVIEWER

As a bachelor, have you sometimes felt an outsider? Or, like the speaker of your poems "Reasons for Attendance," "Dockery & Son," and "Self's the Man," have you enjoyed being single and remained so because you liked and preferred living that way?

LARKIN

Hard to say. Yes, I've remained single by choice, and shouldn't have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too, and so I suppose I am an outsider in the sense you mean. Of course it worries me from time to time, but it would take too long to explain why. Samuel Butler said, Life is an affair of being spoilt in one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

Is the character John Kemp in any way based upon your own youth? Were you *that* shy?

LARKIN

I would say, yes, I was and am extremely shy. Anyone who has stammered will know what agony it is, especially at school. It means you never take the lead in anything or do anything but try to efface yourself. I often wonder if I was shy because I stammered, or vice versa.

INTERVIEWER

Was your childhood unhappy?

LARKIN

My childhood was all right, comfortable and stable and loving, but I wasn't a happy child, or so they say. On the other hand, I've never been a recluse, contrary to reports: I've had friends, and enjoyed their company. In comparison with some

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people I know I'm extremely sociable.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel happiness is unlikely in this world?

LARKIN

Well, I think if you're in good health, and have enough money, and nothing is bothering you in the foreseeable future, that's as much as you can hope for. But "happiness," in the sense of a continuous emotional orgasm, no. If only because you know that you are going to die, and the people you love are going to die.

INTERVIEWER

After "Trouble at Willow Gables," did you write any other short stories or tales?

LARKIN

No. I think a short story should be either a poem or a novel. Unless it's just an anecdote.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever attempted a truly long poem? I've never seen one in print. If not, why?

LARKIN

I've written none. A long poem for me would be a novel. In that sense, *A Girl in Winter* is a poem.

INTERVIEWER

What about a play or a verse play?

LARKIN

I don't like plays. They happen in public, which, as I said, I don't like, and by now I have grown rather deaf, which means I can't hear what's going on. Then again, they are rather like poetry readings: they have to get an instant response, which tends to vulgarize. And of course the intrusion of *person-*

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ality—the actor, the producer—or do you call him the director—is distracting.

All the same, I admire *Murder in the Cathedral* as much as anything Eliot ever wrote. I read it from time to time, for pleasure, which is the highest compliment I can pay.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever meet Eliot?

LARKIN

I didn't know him. Once I was in the Faber offices—the old ones, "24, Russell Square," that magic address!—talking to Charles Monteith, and he said, "Have you ever met Eliot?" I said no, and to my astonishment he stepped out and reappeared with Eliot, who must have been in the next room. We shook hands, and he explained that he was expecting someone to tea and couldn't stay. There was a pause, and he said, "I'm glad to see you in this office." The significance of that was that I wasn't a Faber author—it must have been before 1964, when they published *The Whitsun Weddings*—and I took it as a great compliment. But it was a shattering few minutes: I hardly remember what I thought.

INTERVIEWER

What about Auden? Were you acquainted?

LARKIN

I didn't know him, either. I met Auden once at Stephen Spender's house, which was very kind of Spender, and in a sense he was more frightening than Eliot. I remember he said, Do you like living in Hull? and I said, I don't suppose I'm unhappier there than I should be anywhere else. To which he replied, Naughty, naughty. I thought that was very funny.

But this business of meeting famous writers is agonizing: I had a dreadful few minutes with Forster. My fault, not his. Dylan Thomas came to Oxford to speak to a club I belong to, and we had a drink the following morning. *He* wasn't frightening. In fact, and I know it sounds absurd to say so, but I should

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say I had more in common with Dylan Thomas than with any other "famous writer," in this sort of context.

INTERVIEWER

You mention Auden, Thomas, Yeats and Hardy as early influences in your introduction to the second edition of *The North Ship*. What in particular did you learn from your study of these four?

LARKIN

Oh, for Christ's sake, one doesn't *study* poets! You *read* them, and think, That's marvelous, how is it done, could I do it? and that's how you learn. At the end of it you can't say, That's Yeats, that's Auden, because they've gone, they're like scaffolding that's been taken down. Thomas was a dead end. What effects? Yeats and Auden, the management of lines, the formal distancing of emotion. Hardy, well. . . not to be afraid of the obvious. All those wonderful *dicta* about poetry: "the poet should touch our hearts by showing his own," "the poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel," "the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own"—Hardy knew what it was all about.

INTERVIEWER

When your first book, *The North Ship*, appeared, did you feel you were going to be an important poet?

LARKIN

No, certainly not. I've never felt that anyway. You must remember *The North Ship* was published by an obscure press—The Fortune Press—that didn't even send out review copies; it was next door to a vanity press. One had none of the rewards of authorship, neither money (no agreement) nor publicity. You felt you'd cooked your goose.

INTERVIEWER

How can a young poet know if his work is any good?

LARKIN

I think a young poet, or an old poet, for that matter, should

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try to produce something that pleases himself personally, not only when he's written it but a couple of weeks later. Then he should see if it pleases anyone else, by sending it to the kind of magazine he likes reading. But if it doesn't, he shouldn't be discouraged. I mean, in the seventeenth century every educated man could turn a verse and play the lute. Supposing no one played tennis because they wouldn't make Wimbledon? First and foremost, writing poems should be a pleasure. So should reading them, by God.

INTERVIEWER

How do you account for the great maturity and originality which developed between your first and second poetry collection, *The Less Deceived*?

LARKIN

You know, I really don't know. After finishing my first books, say by 1945, I thought I had come to an end. I couldn't write another novel, I published nothing. My personal life was rather harassing. Then in 1950 I went to Belfast, and things reawoke somehow. I wrote some poems, and thought, These aren't bad, and had that little pamphlet *XX Poems* printed privately. I felt for the first time I was speaking for myself. Thoughts, feelings, language cohered and jumped. They have to do that. Of course they are always lying around in you, but they have to get together.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote that "The impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art." In your case, what is it you are preserving in your poems?

LARKIN

Well, as I said, the experience. The beauty.

INTERVIEWER

Auden admired your forms. But you've stated that form holds little interest for you—content is everything. Could you comment on that?

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LARKIN

I'm afraid that was a rather silly remark, especially now when form is so rare. I read poems, and I think, Yes, that's quite a nice idea, but why can't he make a *poem* of it? Make it memorable? It's no good just writing it down! At any level that matters, form and content are indivisible. What I meant by content is the experience the poem preserves, what it passes on. I must have been seeing too many poems that were simply agglomerations of words when I said that.

INTERVIEWER

In one early interview you stated that you were not interested in any period but the present, or in any poetry but that written in English. Did you mean that quite literally? Has your view changed?

LARKIN

It has not. I don't see how one can ever know a foreign language well enough to make reading poems in it worthwhile. Foreigners' ideas of good English poems are dreadfully crude: Byron and Poe and so on. The Russians liking Burns. But deep down I think foreign languages irrelevant. If that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn't a fenster or a *fenêtre* or whatever. *Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can have only one language, if language is going to mean anything to him.

INTERVIEWER

In D. J. Enright's *Poets of the Nineteen-Fifties*, published in 1955, you made several provocative statements about archetypes and myth which have become well-known. Specifically: "As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty. . . . To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots, but dodges the writer's duty to be original." Does this mean you really do not respond to, say, the monstrous manifestation of the Sphinx in Yeats's "The Second

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Coming''? Or were you merely reacting against bookishness?

LARKIN

My objection to the use in new poems of properties or personae from older poems is not a moral one, but simply because they do not work, either because I have not read the poems in which they appear, or because I have read them and think of them as part of that poem and not a property to be dragged into a new poem as a substitute for securing the effect that is desired. I admit this argument could be pushed to absurd lengths, when a poet could not refer to anything that his readers might not have seen (such as snow, for instance), but in fact poets write for people with the same background and experiences as themselves, which might be taken as a compelling argument in support of provincialism.

INTERVIEWER

The use of archetypes can weaken rather than buttress a poem?

LARKIN

I am not going to fall on my face every time someone uses words such as Orpheus or Faust or Judas. Writers should work for the effects they want to produce, and not wheel out stale old Wardour Street lay figures.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mainly read?

LARKIN

I don't read much. Books I'm sent to review. Otherwise novels I've read before. Detective stories: Gladys Mitchell, Michael Innes, Dick Francis. I'm reading *Framley Parsonage* at the moment. Nothing difficult.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the current state of poetry in England today? Are things better or worse in American poetry?

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LARKIN

I'm afraid I know very little about American poetry. As regards England, well, before the war, when I was growing up, we had Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Auden, Dylan Thomas, John Betjeman—could you pick a comparable team today?

INTERVIEWER

You haven't been to America, have you?

LARKIN

Oh no, I've never been to America, nor to anywhere else, for that matter. Does that sound very snubbing? It isn't meant to. I suppose I'm pretty unadventurous by nature, partly that isn't the way I earn my living—reading and lecturing and taking classes and so on. I should hate it.

And of course I'm so deaf now that I shouldn't dare. Someone would say, What about Ashbery, and I'd say, I'd prefer strawberry, that kind of thing. I suppose everyone has his own dream of America. A writer once said to me, If you ever go to America, go either to the East Coast or the West Coast: the rest is a desert full of bigots. That's what I think I'd like: where if you help a girl trim the Christmas tree you're regarded as engaged, and her brothers start oiling their shotguns if you don't call on the minister. A version of pastoral.

INTERVIEWER

How is your writing physically accomplished? At what stage does a poem go through the typewriter?

LARKIN

I write—or used to—in notebooks in pencil, trying to complete each stanza before going on to the next. Then when the poem is finished I type it out, and sometimes make small alterations.

INTERVIEWER

You use a lot of idioms and very common phrases—for irony, I'd guess, or to bear more meaning than usual, never for

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shock value. Do these phrases come late, to add texture or whatever, or are they integral from the beginning?

LARKIN

They occur naturally.

INTERVIEWER

How important is enjambement for you? In certain lines, you seem to isolate lives by the very line breaks. . .

LARKIN

No device is important in itself. Writing poetry is playing off the natural rhythms and word-order of speech against the artificialities of rhyme and metre. One has a few private rules: Never split an adjective and its noun, for instance.

INTERVIEWER

How do you decide whether or not to rhyme?

LARKIN

Usually the idea of a poem comes with a line or two of it, and they determine the rest. Normally one does rhyme. Deciding *not* to is much harder.

INTERVIEWER

Can you drink and write? Have you tried any consciousness-expanding drugs?

LARKIN

No, though of course those of my generation are drinkers. Not druggers.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the genesis and working-out of a poem based upon an image that most people would simply pass by? (A clear road between neighbors, an ambulance in city traffic?)

LARKIN

If I could answer this sort of question, I'd be a professor

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rather than a librarian. And in any case, I shouldn't want to. It's a thing you don't want to think about. It happens, or happened, and if it's something to be grateful for, you're grateful.

I remember saying once, I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: it's like going round explaining how you sleep with your wife. Whoever I was talking to said, They'd do that, too, if their agents could fix it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you throw away a lot of poems?

LARKIN

Some poems didn't get finished. Some didn't get published. I never throw anything away.

INTERVIEWER

You only included six of your own poems in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (as opposed, say, to twelve by John Betjeman). Do you consider these to be your half-dozen best, or are they merely "representative?" I was surprised not to find "Church Going," arguably your single most famous poem.

LARKIN

My recollection is that I decided on six as a limit for my generation and anyone younger, to save hurt feelings. Mine were representative, as you say—one pretty one, one funny one, one long one, and so on. As editor, I couldn't give myself much space. . . could I?

INTERVIEWER

In your introduction to that anthology, you make a fine point of saying you didn't include any poems "requiring a glossary for their full understanding." Do you feel your own lucid work has helped close the gap between poetry and the public, a gap which experiment and obscurity have widened?

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LARKIN

This was to explain why I hadn't included dialect poems. We have poets who write in pretty dense Lallans. Nothing to do with obscurity in the sense you mean.

INTERVIEWER

Okay, but your introduction to *All What Jazz?* takes a stance against experiment, citing the trio of Picasso, Pound, and Parker. Why do you distrust the new?

LARKIN

It seems to me undeniable that up to this century literature used language in the way we all use it, painting represented what anyone with normal vision sees, and music was an affair of nice noises rather than nasty ones. The innovation of "modernism" in the arts consisted of doing the opposite. I don't know why, I'm not a historian. You have to distinguish between things that seemed odd when they were new but are now quite familiar, such as Ibsen and Wagner, and things that seemed crazy when they were new and seem crazy now, like *Finnegans Wake* and Picasso.

INTERVIEWER

What's that got to do with jazz?

LARKIN

Everything. Jazz showed this very clearly because it is such a telescoped art, only as old as the century, if that. Charlie Parker wrecked jazz by—or so they tell me—using the chromatic rather than the diatonic scale. The diatonic scale is what you use if you want to write a national anthem, or a love song, or a lullaby. The chromatic scale is what you use to give the effect of drinking a quinine martini and having an enema simultaneously.

If I sound heated on this, it's because I love jazz, the jazz of Armstrong and Bechet and Ellington and Bessie Smith and Beiderbecke. To have it all destroyed by a paranoiac drug-

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addict made me furious. Anyway, it's dead now, dead as Elizabethan madrigal singing. We can only treasure the records. And I do.

INTERVIEWER

Let's return to the Oxford anthology for a moment. Some of its critics said your selections not only favored traditional poetic forms, but minor poets as well. How do you respond to that?

LARKIN

Since it was *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse*, I had of course to represent the principal poets of the century by their best or most typical works. I think I did this. The trouble is that if this is all you do, the result will be a worthy but boring book, since there are quite enough books doing this already, and I thought it would be diverting to put in less familiar poems that were good or typical in themselves, but by authors who didn't rank full representation. I saw them as unexpected flowers along an only-too-well-trodden path. I think they upset people in a way I hadn't intended, although it's surprising how they are now being quoted and anthologised themselves.

Most people make anthologies out of other anthologies; I spent five years reading everyone's complete works, ending with six months in the basement of the Bodleian Library handling all the twentieth-century poetry they had received. It was great fun. I don't say I made any major discoveries, but I hope I managed to suggest that there are good poems around that no one knows about. At any rate, I made a readable book. I made twentieth-century poetry sound nice. That's quite an achievement in itself.

INTERVIEWER

Not many have commented upon the humor in your poetry, like the wonderful pun on "the stuff that dreams are made on" in "Toads." Do you consciously use humor to achieve a particular effect, or to avoid an opposite emotion?

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LARKIN

One uses humor to make people laugh. In my case, I don't know whether they in fact do. The trouble is, it makes them think you aren't being serious. That's the risk you take.

INTERVIEWER

Your most recent collection, *High Windows*, contains at least three poems I'd call satirical—"Posterity," "Homage to a Government," and "This Be the Verse." Do you consider yourself a satirist?

LARKIN

No, I shouldn't call myself a satirist, or any other sort of *-ist*. The poems you mention were conceived in the same way as the rest. That is to say, as poems. To be a satirist, you have to think you know better than everyone else. I've never done that.

INTERVIEWER

An American poet-critic, Peter Davison, has characterized yours as a "diminutional talent"—meaning you make things clear by making them small—England reduced to "squares of wheat," and so forth. Is this a fair comment? Is it a technique you're aware of?

LARKIN

It's difficult to answer remarks like that. The line, "Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat" refers to London, not England. It doesn't seem "diminutional" to me, rather the reverse, if anything. It's meant to make the postal districts seem rich and fruitful.

INTERVIEWER

Davison also sees your favorite subjects as failure and weakness.

LARKIN

I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his sub-

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jects, not by what his subjects are. Otherwise you're getting near the totalitarian attitude of wanting poems about steel production figures rather than *"Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?"* Poetry isn't a kind of paint-spray you use to cover selected objects with. A good poem about failure is a success.

INTERVIEWER

Is it intentional that the form of "Toads" is alternating uneven trimeters and dimeters, with alternating off-rhymes, whereas "Toads Revisited" is in trimeters and off-rhymed couplets? What determines the form of a poem for you? Is it the first line, with its attendant rhythms?

LARKIN

Well, yes: I think I've admitted this already. At this distance I can't recall how far the second Toad poem was planned as a companion to the first. It's more likely that I found it turning out to be a poem about work, but different from the first, and so it seemed amusing to link them.

INTERVIEWER

How did you arrive upon the image of a toad for work or labor?

LARKIN

Sheer genius.

INTERVIEWER

As a writer, what are your particular quirks? Do you feel you have any conspicuous or secret flaw as a writer?

LARKIN

I really don't know. I suppose I've used the iambic pentameter a lot: some people find this oppressive and try to get away from it. My secret flaw is just not being very good, like everyone else. I've never been didactic, never tried to make poetry *do* things, never gone out to look for it. I waited for it to come to me, in whatever shape it chose.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you belong to any particular tradition in English letters?

LARKIN

I seem to remember George Fraser saying that poetry was either "veeshion"—he was Scotch—or "moaral deescourse," and I was the second, and the first was better. A well-known publisher asked me how one punctuated poetry, and looked flabbergasted when I said, The same as prose. By which I mean that I write, or wrote, as everyone did till the mad lads started, using words and syntax in the normal way to describe recognizable experiences as memorably as possible. That doesn't seem to me a tradition. The other stuff, the mad stuff, is more an aberration.

INTERVIEWER

Have you any thoughts on the office of Poet Laureate? Does it serve a valid function?

LARKIN

Poetry and sovereignty are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united in this way, in England. On the other hand, it's not clear what the Laureate is, or does. Deliberately so, in a way: it isn't a job, there are no duties, no salary, and yet it isn't quite an honor, either, or not just an honor. I'm sure the worst thing about it, especially today, is the publicity it brings, the pressure to be involved publicly with poetry, which must be pretty inimical to any real writing.

Of course, the days when Tennyson would publish a sonnet telling Gladstone what to do about foreign policy are over. It's funny that Kipling, who is what most people think of as a poet as national spokesman, never was Laureate. He should have had it when Bridges was appointed, but it's typical that he didn't—the post isn't thought of in that way. It really is a genuine attempt to honor someone. But the publicity having anything to do with the Palace is so fierce these days, it must be really more of an ordeal than an honor.

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INTERVIEWER

Your poetry volumes have appeared at the rate of one per decade. From what you say, though, is it unlikely we'll have another around 1984? Did you really only complete about three poems in any given year?

LARKIN

It's unlikely I shall write any more poems, but when I did, yes, I did write slowly. I was looking at "The Whitsun Weddings" [the poem] just the other day, and found that I began it sometime in the summer of 1957. After three pages, I dropped it for another poem that in fact was finished but never published. I picked it up again, in March 1958, and worked on it till October, when it was finished. But when I look at the diary I was keeping at the time, I see that the kind of incident it describes happened in July 1955! So in all, it took over three years. Of course, that's an exception. But I did write slowly, partly because you're finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time.

INTERVIEWER

For someone who dislikes being interviewed, you've responded generously.

LARKIN

I'm afraid I haven't said anything very interesting. You must realize I've never had "ideas" about poetry. To me it's always been a personal, almost physical release or solution to a complex pressure of needs—wanting to create, to justify, to praise, to explain, to externalize, depending on the circumstances. And I've never been much interested in other people's poetry—one reason for writing, of course, is that no one's written what you want to read.

Probably my notion of poetry is very simple. Some time ago I agreed to help judge a poetry competition—you know, the kind where they get about 35,000 entries, and you look at the best few thousand. After a bit I said, Where are all the love poems? And nature poems? And they said, Oh, we threw all those away. I expect they were the ones I should have liked.

—Robert Phillips

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Two Poems by Hugh Seidman

Ars Poetica

(for the poet RD)

The blind boy taped you and we clapped
starving beak after crumbs
hoarse with cancer and one breast
wrapped like a broken arm
where the oxygen tank
stood like a green soldier

You had liked my work, fed me cake
thin, hawk nosed Italian
aristocratic, unpublished
astrologer of four thousand poems
persisting as a typist
or on tiny grants

But how could an editor have seen
your unsent books
or had they grown like bonds
when the poor poets read
on your fold-up chairs
as if failure were success

As once you ignored me for months
so that I thought of my mother
who had replayed days like war
for me and my father

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or who had answered our door
with a commando's paranoia

But how could I have explained
your lung on the x-ray
clouded with the breath
that you had held so long
or that I never went back
to see you after I clapped

Though I mourned with a rigor
like your daughter and sons
as if for myself
at your body burned to bone
because you had nothing
when you might have had what?

Though how could I have lifted
the sky from your chest
or asked your forgiveness
from what had always raged
at your blacked-out name on the bell
where each day flared

For inside was the dark
like a moral that the muse
was never to be spared
the pride of her children
though I heard your choice:
I had no courage not to write

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And still the blind boy's dog moaned
and you wept to your flesh
thinner than beaten gold
that a breath might have torn
and still I shut the blinds
as you had at your work

And your death taught its debt
who escaped your life?
for you did not absolve me
and I wrote as my fourth grade student had
of his anorexic sister:
Fire is like a dead person

And your ashes blew to breath
for what was death but words
to break the tree and rock
but still the leaves fell
like what alphabet
to make you my muse in that dark

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Kaddish

O TORAH TORAH TORAH
downtown but uptown
and in gold on black bronze and lead:
This Obelisk Shall Outlast

O Dream Dream Dream
yet I fasted not nor atoned
I made no tabernacle
on Tish'a Be'ab with Solomon

O Mitzvah Mitzvah Mitzvah
I faked the Hebrew
I the circumcised
stubborn as the metal

O Life Life Life
I yelled to the mohel's knife
I bewailed myself
like any for the dead

O Jew Jew Jew
of God's pagan blood
I was a man in a blue suit
suede shoes and gold ring

O Israel Israël Israel
though I had no tribe
and my parents lay
under the bronze and lead

O TORAH TORAH TORAH
uptown but downtown
but O father, O mother
who would mourn Zion if you were dead

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Adam LeFevre

Nocturne With Cows

Each night the dairyman her husband
sinks like a hoof
in the muck of his sleeping,
and she rises to her work,
out over the stiles,
lifting her nightgown
above her knees
to wade the undulant pastures
where, with a curtsey the irony
of which does not vex them,
she dismisses the recumbent
Guernseys from the blue spills
of curdling moonlight
that are her responsibility
to gather and bury
by the hour before dawn.

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Harvey Shapiro

On A Sunday

When you write something
you want it to live—
you have that obligation, to give it
a start in life.
Virginia Woolf, pockets full of stones,
sinks into the sad river
that surrounds us daily. Everything
about London amazed her, the shapes
and sight, the conversations on a bus.
At the end of her life, she said
London is my patriotism.
I feel that about New York.
Would Frank O'Hara say Virginia Woolf,
get up? No, but images from her novels
stay in my head—the old poet
(Swinburne, I suppose) sits on the lawn
of the countryhouse, mumbling
into the sun. Pleased with the images,
I won't let the chaos of my life
overwhelm me. There is the City,
and the sun blazes on Central Park
in September. These people on a Sunday
are beautiful, various. And the poor
among them make me think
the experience I knew will be relived again,
so that my sentences will keep hold
of reality, for a while at least.

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Charles Fowler

Fust.

Shall we go then, just to the corner
And no farther, not like lovers and other strangers
Who catch the same bus, and ride off together
In a blast of exhaust? Who linger
Over half-filled cups and dwell upon
Each other's eyes—until some bruiser wakes them
And tells them to shove off?

I have known their blushes, known them all;
Seen them hug and snuggle while I fogged the glass
And waited; watched my hopes splashed in April
And dried up in the fall. I have measured out my tears
With whiskey consolations, felt the years
Grow shorter and—in brief, I was afraid.
What if all the love I need has passed me by already,
As I mourn another summer? And if every woman
Who crosses my path, turning the corner
Or beating it down the Mall, should wince to herself
And say, "That is not him: that is not what I want at all.
That is not Jim, at all."

No, I am not Burt Reynolds, nor was meant to be.
Am a devoted fool, useful to kill an hour,
Snare a giggle or two: Romeo's syph friend.
In the movies, I would be played by Ronald Reagan.

I go stale.
I go *stale*.

Shall I cut up all my shirts? Do I
Dare to buy cologne? I will wear a loud bandana
And stroll around downtown. . .

I do not think that anyone will speak to me.

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A Summer at Estabrook

William Ferguson

I realize of course that I'm no longer worthy of the name musician, if I ever was, though officially I'm still registered as a specially-funded pianoforte soloist with Segismundo Alegría and the Vienna Philharmonic for the duration of the Estabrook Festival, Summer 1978. I know this is true, because one of my new Anarchist friends at the Black Orchid Bar actually called the Festival offices to check me out; the secretary told him she wasn't allowed to comment on my musical competence, "if any," but I was in fact on record with them in what she called a "semiactive file"; and then she made some fantastic allusion to suicidal tendencies I was supposed to have. I don't know what to make of this last charge except to deny it straight out; the other insults are harder to answer, because I really do feel semi-active these days and I'm not sure how I'd characterize my musical ability except to say that it's dubious and maybe even preterite; I suppose that's why I'm out here campaigning for the Anarchists right now instead of making music the way God meant me to.

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I feel a little stupid trotting around Worcester this way for Zérault's mayoral campaign, but I have to do something; I can't practice very well in this state of mind, and spending my time in the dormitory is not exactly my idea of entertainment. I have a feeling I'm never going to get asked to play in concert, and that's idiotic, because on my dresser I have a personal letter from Alegría inviting me to come to Estabrook this summer to do Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto—with the great man himself conducting!—and any musician worth his salt knows what that means to a person's career. When the letter arrived I immediately packed up and came to Worcester on the bus, but ever since I got here it's been total confusion; I'm ashamed to say that in all these weeks in residence I haven't even been able to find the main concert hall, and if Alegría is here I'm certainly unaware of it. I haven't even heard a proper performance yet; all I do is go to an endless series of rehearsals, and every day it's a different piece, in a different hall, and always with people I have never seen before and who seem to have no particular interest in my skills or even my name, though I must say they are unfailingly polite. Some of the conductors are just awful, but the musicians seem to be able to ignore them with a fair degree of success; I've even seen one beating time all alone on the stage, swooping and grimacing as if the orchestra had not left hours ago to catch the movie in town, and only I was left, occasionally playing a note or two at random out of a sense of propriety, but giving up at last and going home, or rather back to the dormitory and the inevitable chess game with Myksis, the Deutsche Grammophon representative for the Quinsigamond area, an eerie little Lithuanian with whom I share my modest quarters and who, at the moment, seems to be my only friend.

Last week I had a very unsettling experience at the Festival offices. I was determined to find out whether Alegría was really here and if so whether I could see him and perhaps get my career back on the track, and so one rainy day I marched into the main building and talked to a secretary named Eve who told me what I had always been told on the phone, namely that Dr. Alegría was indeed in residence but his office hours varied

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and it was practically impossible to catch him. Could I make an appointment, I asked? No, appointments were not being made for this week. For next week then? No, I had to come back next week to make an appointment for next week. I looked at her in desperate silence; her perfume was intoxicating, like a mixture of dust and sea salt; I tried to look helpless and childlike to work on her sympathies, but she stood up abruptly and told me I might as well save myself the trouble, since as far as she was concerned I was a dead man. I felt a surge of desire; she must have felt it too, because now she came around the desk and held my burning face in her hands and kissed me full on the mouth; my armpits took on an unfamiliar smell, like rotten wheat; "follow me," she whispered, and disappeared through a small door with a purple knob; I followed immediately—I'm absolutely certain I went through the same door she did—but as it clicked shut behind me I found myself in the alley in the drizzling rain, with no sign of Eve and no way to get back in except to go to the main entrance again and start over, which in my state of mind seemed like one *da capo* too many; so I went home in tears. Next time—if I ever do go back—I plan to march straight to the piano in Dr. Alegría's office and start to play, just to assert myself and my rights, like Zeitblom in the brothel (or was it his friend?); it will be a ridiculous gesture, I suppose, but I have nothing else left to do.

So here I am playing ward-heeler, mostly out of boredom, canvassing the College Square area for the Anarchist ticket. We just might have a shot at the Mayor's office this year with Théophile ("Big Ted") Zérault, the straw boss down at Ashland Steel, even though his only real campaign issue is that he wants to dismantle the Holy Cross conservatory and replace it with a facility of some more practical benefit to the community. Why I'm working for him I'm not really sure; I suspect myself of feeling some resentment toward the Holy Cross musicians who have actually been able to perform at Estabrook while I sit on my hands. But there's more to it than that, of course. Anarchism has always seemed to be the only reasonable philosophy for a person like myself; as a musician, as a citizen, as a human being, I do not hesitate to admit that I am a politi-

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cal idiot, and my new friends at the Black Orchid—God knows —are quick to agree. At the same time I think I have a right to know where I stand; for example, it seems a little strange to me that I've never met the candidate in all these months, considering that the Orchid is supposed to be his headquarters. I've never even heard a convincing physical description; I imagine him to myself as a huge, ruddy-faced, good-natured barbarian, somewhat jowly, with tinted glasses and a bulge in his jacket suggesting the presence of a gun. This idea may be totally off the mark, but people have to make do with whatever images they can get when there's nothing else to go on—and as far as I can tell that's most of the time. I have to go through the most incredible mental gyrations just to make sense of my living arrangements, for instance, and that's one area of my life I would have expected to be able to understand.

I think I mentioned my roommate Myksis. We live in the suite that used to belong to old Professor Dervis, who died of chalk poisoning the month before we came and whose belongings were never properly cleaned out, so that certain articles of his—an ornamental bowl with painted pheasants inside, a dog-headed cane of ash and steel, a Douay Bible bound in purple calf—have by assimilation become part of our ménage. Myksis does all the cooking, since I have no talent in that area, and I suppose I should be grateful, but he always serves me breakfast in Dervis's old bowl, which I think may have something wrong with it because I've noticed a kind of purplish fluorescence in the oatmeal these past few mornings, and while I have no reason to associate it with any intentions Myksis might have against me I just thought I'd better mention it here in case anything happens to me and people wonder why. There's something peculiar about the man; to begin with I don't think his name is really Myksis at all, since he hardly ever looks up when I say it. His excuse is that he's a little deaf, which I'm afraid I don't believe, since one of his duties is supposed to be audio quality control in local recordings. Does that make sense if he's hard of hearing? —It does not. Learning about his supposed deafness for some reason has greatly increased my affection for him, and I'm terrified that my living situation, coupled with

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these irrational emotions, may be leading me to destruction, if not at breakfast then in some other way too horrible to imagine; and soon, perhaps, very soon indeed. —But I'm sure I'm being unnecessarily hard on poor Myksis, who seems to be a good person underneath it all. I've begun oversleeping almost every morning—from an obscure desire to miss rehearsal, I suppose—and then I open half an eye to find myself in the same indecipherable situation as the night before, with the little fellow shaking my arm and urging me to wake up in spite of my drowsy assertions that there is no waking, only different kinds of sleep.

At any rate, Myksis is my friend. . . perhaps not the kind of friend I would have wished for myself, but a friend nevertheless, and a good listener, and someone with whom I can share the intoxicating experience of Estabrook at the height of the season. They do some very interesting things here from time to time; last summer for instance they staged what sounds like a really remarkable little piano piece of the experimental variety, and the Estabrook performance was the première, as I learned today from a scrapbook I found as I was going through some old papers of Dervis's. The piece was called *Fire with Fire!*, with no composer listed (though it seems the evening was made possible by a grant from the Worcester Anarchist Alliance), and from the description it must have been one of the most expensive solo pieces ever created; according to "Perdix," waxing purple for the *Worcester Telegram* Sunday music section, the piano had to be considered a total loss by the end of the concert. On a framework above the keyboard was suspended a large translucent container filled to the brim with superheated mercury, attached to a weighted steel rod and a central pivot, like a pendulum. The pianist's first duty, according to the score, was to break the membrane over a small hole at the bottom of the vessel and then to start it swinging, so that now and then a large drop of the heavy glowing liquid landed on a note; the weight of the metal was enough to hold the key down until the enormous temperatures had fused it forever in a depressed position. Once this juggernaut was in operation, "to the delight and consternation of the adepts of St. Cecilia," the per-

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former went behind the piano and mounted a platform supported by some dubious wooden staging; here he picked up a portable industrial laser in the shape of a thyrsos, which he waved at the audience in the obligatory fashion (Perdix: "the excitement was palpable"), then held it in front of him (in what was probably the only comfortable position) and began to beam it downward, severing the sounding wires one by one, two by two, or three by three; as each string broke the audience was "convulsed with tremors as if the world were ending"; an A flat, sounded and held by the burning mercury, would presently be obliterated by another A flat of truly apocalyptic proportions but almost no duration, since the strings that could have held it were gone; instead all the remaining strings began to ring with a vengeance, "reminding the awed listener of a thousand mothers bewailing the death of as many sons." (I think the reviewer must have been correct in his judgment that "while certain neoclassical antecedents might be claimed for the piece," its "frank sexuality" and "anarchic Dionysian spontaneity" clearly linked it with the undergraduate tradition of piano-busting with sledgehammers.) Nothing like that has happened this summer, or if it has we haven't heard about it; we're supposed to get the *Telegram* every morning but somebody always steals it. I wish there were some way to get accurate schedules; maybe you have to be friends with some influential person. . . I just don't know.

If only I'd had the sense to go to Holy Cross in the first place! I had the chance and let it slip, and now I think back on it with incredible longing, like a man who has lost certain rights forever. You can see the campus from College Square—a great conglomeration of pillars, balconies, belfries, crenellations and facades, all lined and banded with green copper, like a medieval city on a high hill; between the further buildings the very air seems to reverberate, and under the golden haze you can see banners and pennants of a hundred subtle colors. The young novices shuffle drowsily past me on their way to class; they seem to be ringed and wreathed in a splendid sleep, so that just to be near the rise and fall of their perfumed lungs is to know peace. I have never tried to speak to them as they pass, not even to hand

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them a leaflet, but I'm certain they would never answer or even notice they had been addressed; sleep fills their eyes like an unbroken membrane of belief; it seems infinitely touching that there should be people who spend their lives trying to wake them.

For some reason it's not possible—or not permitted—for persons like myself to visit Holy Cross. (It should be understood that this name refers exclusively to the conservatory; the rest of the school is something no one is able to believe in any longer. When a classicist or a historian tells me he's "teaching at Holy Cross this year" I have learned to understand it as an elegant euphemism for unemployment.) To begin with, it's far from certain whether the institution really is where it seems to be, in spite of the appearances I've just described. That seems incredible? It did to me; so one day last week, deciding to see for myself, I borrowed Myksis's old Pontiac and drove through an ancient underpass to the other side of the Providence and Worcester tracks, where the buildings of Holy Cross shone for a moment in the sun before the roadside turned countrylike and green as if the entire city had been a dream. When I had passed the hill I was surprised to find myself near the Black Orchid, which I had always approached from another direction. Now I took a sharp right into a residential area, thinking perhaps I could find an open gate at the back of the campus, but the road ended suddenly at the top of the hill near an old stone house which seemed empty and which, together with its extensive grounds, occupied the entire summit; in other words it was in the exact spot where Holy Cross had appeared to be from the other side; on the great lawn, near the broken gazebo and the reflecting pool clogged with ash leaves, were several ornamental hen pheasants pecking disconsolately at the ground, with not a soul in sight.

I had the feeling I'd seen the house somewhere before, and when I had deciphered the name on the rusted steel plaque in the driveway I recognized it as the backdrop for numerous family portraits I'd seen in Professor Dervis's scrapbook. It was huge and barren, with open doors everywhere, looking destroyed in spite of their wholeness, swinging in the breeze or

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banging helplessly against the jamb. I parked the car by the nameplate and went inside. The interior was a maze of oak and polished granite, with here and there a spiral staircase leading to the second floor; the odd thing was that there was no main stair, and in fact nothing in the house seemed to be principal—there was no door that was obviously a front door, because no matter what side of the house you stood on it seemed like the back; inside there was no main fireplace, though there were perhaps two dozen small ones just big enough to warm one person, and for a long time I tried to decide which area might have been the living room, because most of the cubicles had the dead air of cramped individual quarters. In the pantry I found the skeleton of a servant—man or woman, I couldn't tell. All at once I was overcome with desire, which in my experience is often released by an image of mortality, and I began pacing miserably up and down the corridors, not knowing what to do; then through a side window I saw a young woman on the lawn, a recent widow, to judge from her dress; she was sitting on the remains of the summer house, reading a book bound in purple calf; I went out immediately and struck up a conversation (about what I don't remember); she seemed to like me; her name was of course Eve; and after a decent interval, with the tender slowness of habitual lovers, we took off each other's clothes and sank together onto the grass; but when I went inside her I felt her grow heavy under my weight and I felt nauseous, as if in her motions the earth itself were heaving around me; and by the time I came she was gone.

People are so taken with what they see around them, so willing to believe! It never occured to me to doubt the reality of the old stone house or the ruined gazebo, or the ornamental hen pheasants, even when the woman had dissolved into the grass in the very act of intercourse, or rather when I saw that she had never been anything but sweet clover and purple bluets like the rest of the cool green lawn on which I lay naked; and now the whistling of the wind began to sound strangely human and scornful, so that I ran awkwardly back to the car, pulling my clothes on as I went, and drove back the way I had come, wanting (I have to admit it)—wanting to die. Just before the ancient

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underpass I glanced up the hill, expecting to see the great house, but there was Holy Cross again, shining as bright as ever on the summit, and I realized to my chagrin that I had probably lain naked in human company I was unable to perceive, perhaps in the middle of a rehearsal, and the sounds I attributed to the wind may have been the jeering whistles of conservatory students whose practice had been comically interrupted by the lewdness of middle age. I was surprised at this thought; I think this was the day I began to doubt my sanity; but I learned an important lesson when I saw the conservatory gleaming for the second time, impossibly, on the exact site of the ruined manor, namely that an obsessive vision doesn't dissolve merely because it has been shown to be unreal. My mood improved remarkably as I thought about this, and I was able to practice a couple of hours without falling into the usual depression; I would even have gone to rehearsal, but by this time of course the secretaries have forgotten me completely, and I'm never able to find out when my evening rehearsal is till the day after it's held, which is not really very useful.

I was never fitted for pure music, was always too clouded, too opaque; and I used to think it was only an abundance of life, but on the day I searched for Holy Cross I began to be afraid the life itself might be redundant and barren, a lonely inner city of whirling ash and freezing steel; it must have been this intuition of sterility that drove me to Anarchism, with its touching faith in human goodness. I confess I was not entirely uninfluenced by Zérault's hostility to the conservatory, especially after my difficult experience with it. He seems to have been some kind of avant-garde musician when he was young (he may even have studied composition with Alegría), but an ear infection put him out of action when he was still in his twenties, and ever since then he's hated all music with an unnatural passion, even to the point of being unable to trust anyone who can hold a tune. —It occurs to me that this may be the reason I've never met the great Théophile; our mutual friends must be keeping us apart, because Zérault has a violent temper, and if he walked into the Orchid when I was there he might go out of control and break my fingers, or whatever they do to discourage pianists in

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that part of town. I wouldn't hold it against him; I suppose I even love him, though I'm terrified that he may be the instrument of my destruction, if not now, then soon, very soon; but basically he's a good person and would most certainly make a good mayor, which is why I'm down in College Square right now, with Holy Cross looming above me like the City of God, trying to convince the good people of Worcester to vote for a man I've never met. The comrades know I don't campaign very hard, but nobody at the Orchid seems to care—which is to be expected, since we Worcester Anarchists are not exactly famous for our political organization.

Postlude. This evening I showed this piece to Myksis, since in spite of his despicable qualities and dubious identity he continues to be my only friend. I instructed him to skip over the parts in which he was mentioned, since he would understand that they were the fruits of a casual paranoia and did not represent my real feelings. "*Très bien*," he said absently, and settled down to the task in Dervis's old easy chair. He read somewhat dutifully at first—I began to collect the dirty coffee cups around the room so as not to appear to be watching—but later his interest must have increased, because I let a glass fall and break on the tile floor and he didn't look up. I noticed him smiling unaccountably when he was about two-thirds of the way through, which made me very nervous; then he grew more serious; when he finished he slammed the manuscript down on the Formica and gave a loud whoop that made my blood run cold; I looked at him as Schopenhauer's squirrel must have looked at the fatal snake, waiting for an explanation, even though I knew that any possible one would have to be infinitely destructive.

"It's marvelous!" he said. "I love it!"

I stood there like a stone; of all the possible reactions this horrid little person might have had, this was the most unexpected. "You love what?" I asked him finally, but I was so extremely fearful of his answer that I bolted from the room before he had a chance to speak and ran down the street and under the railroad tracks all the way to the sanctuary of the Black Orchid,

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a good two miles, and didn't come home till past midnight; it's—wait a minute—it's 1:15 now, and even though I'm exhausted I thought it might be a good idea to write this postscript before I went to sleep, because I think I understand now why my very first reader (he's watching me right now) came so close to driving me insane with his incomprehensible praise.

My first thought was that he wanted to kill me, perhaps by driving me to a confused and bitter suicide on the tracks of the Providence and Worcester; then I reflected that after all we had been living together for several weeks in relative harmony and really were friends, at least in some extended sense of the word; it was unthinkable.

Then what could it mean?

An evening of serious drinking didn't get me any closer to a solution, perhaps because I spent most of my time holding hands with a pretty French Canadian bar-girl in a low-cut purple dress; she reminded me strongly of Eve, to the point that I even asked her name; it was, of course, Eve; and I was going to see if I could convince her to come home with me when she dissolved without warning into the moonless night. I finally staggered alone into the street, where the cold air sobered me a bit; ancient Chevrolets were oozing up and down the pavement like reptiles; to the north, far up on the hill, I could see the flashlights of the grave robbers moving back and forth on the grounds of the old stone mansion. Then the solution came to me, like a bolt from heaven.

There were only two possibilities: either my friend had praised the work in order to destroy me with irony, which was not likely, or else he had read my words with an exotic technique I once knew well but had completely forgotten about until tonight: a perverse manner of reading in which every statement is assumed to be a falsehood, every agonizing ratiocination an entertaining game, every true passion a triumph of the histrionic will. It had to be the latter: Myksis had read my work as though it were fiction. I confess I have never in my life felt quite so frightened, or so alone.

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Portfolio

In the Garden

Jennifer Bartlett

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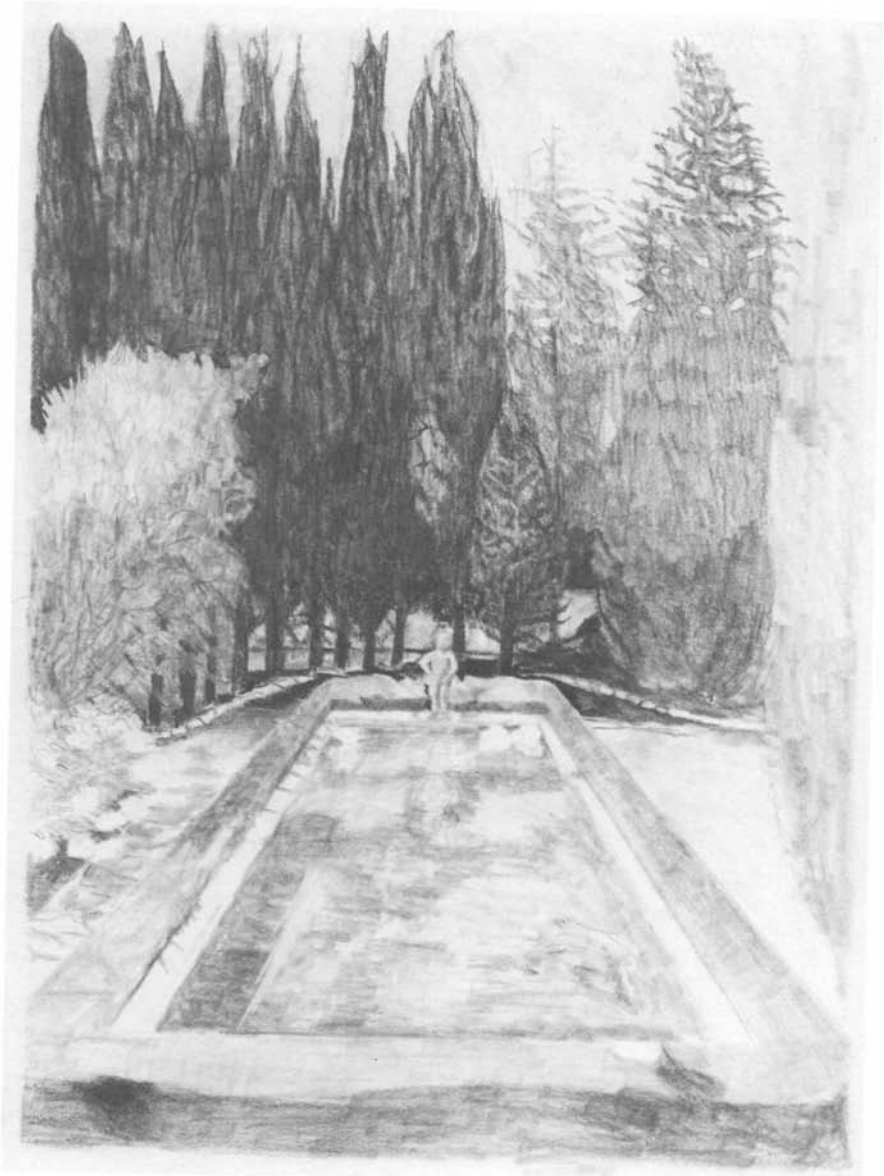

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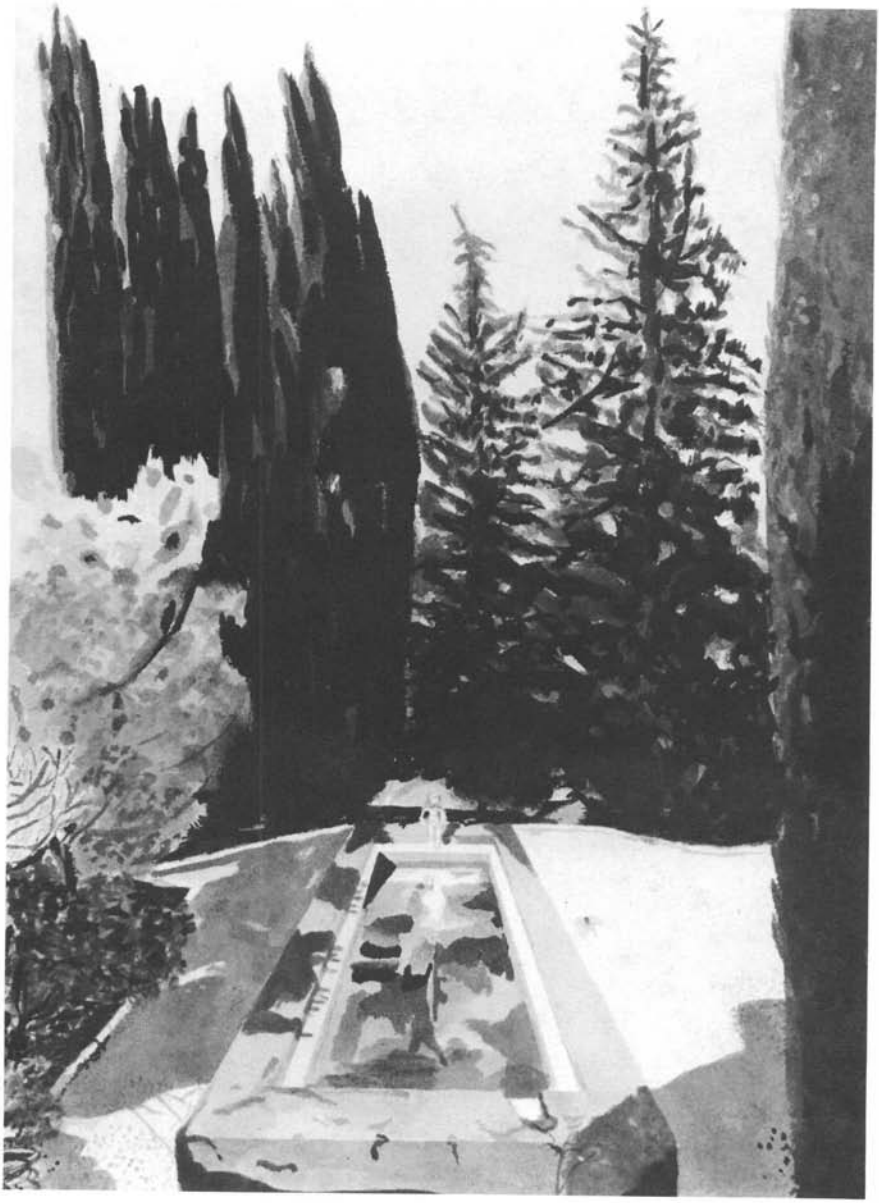

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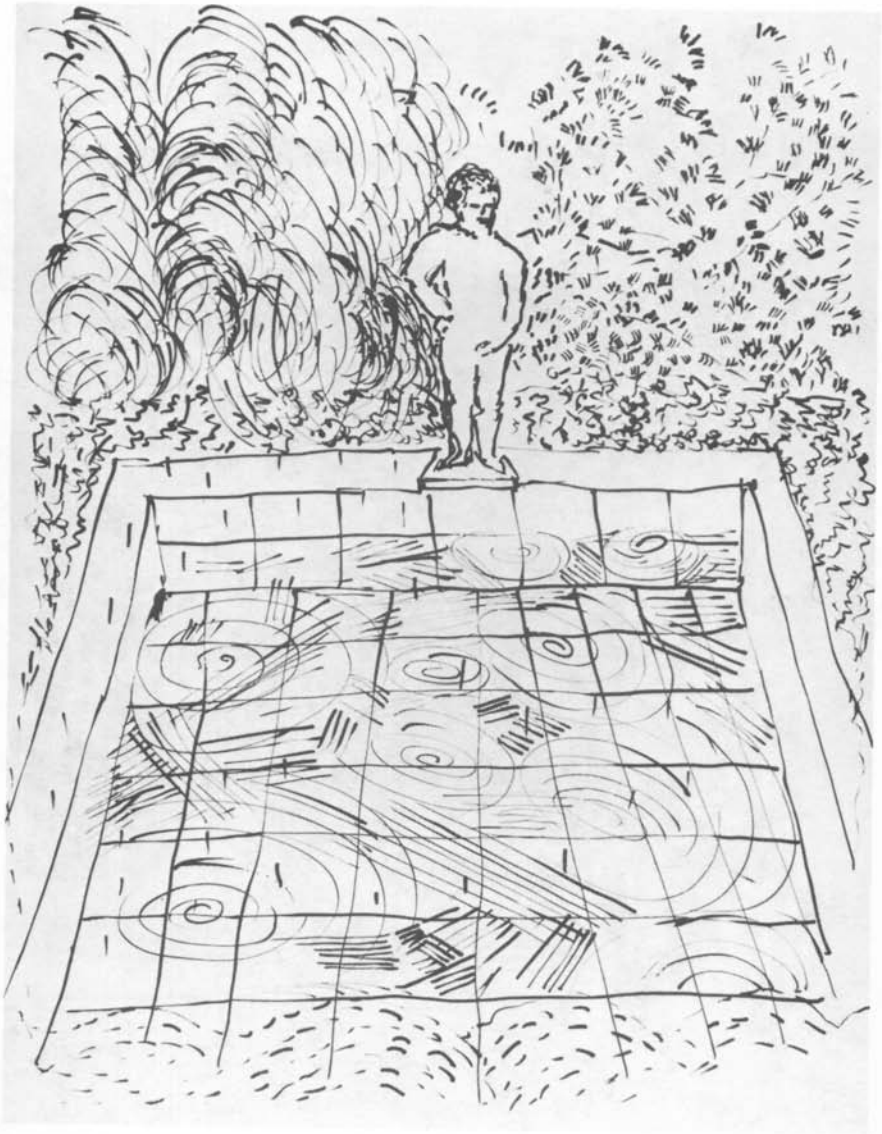

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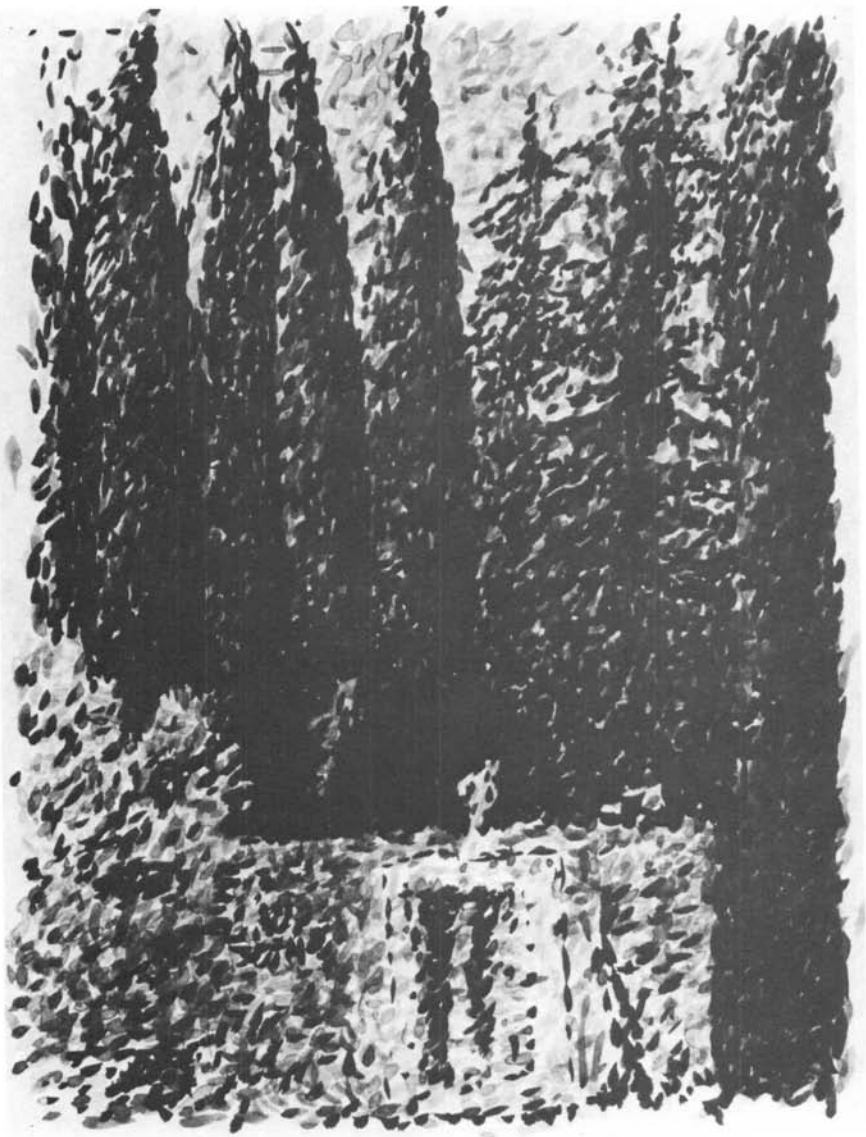

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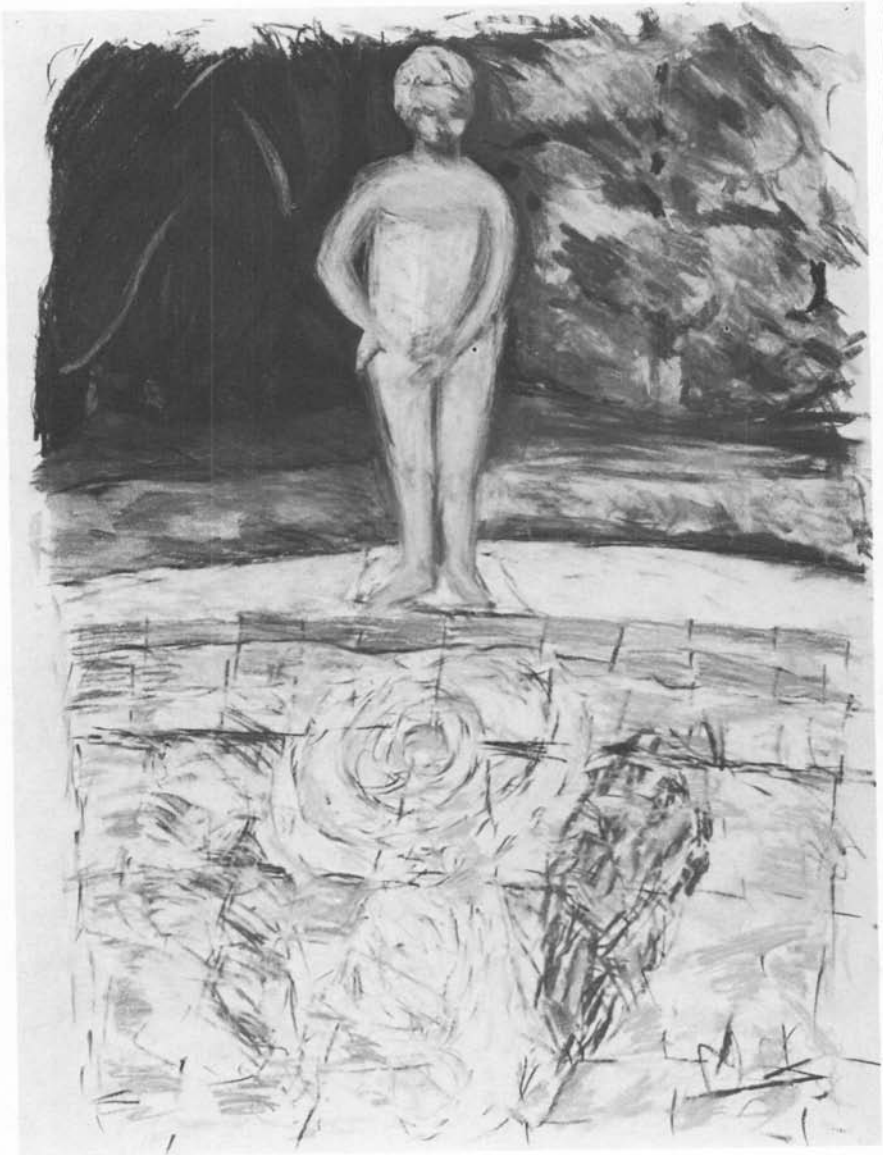

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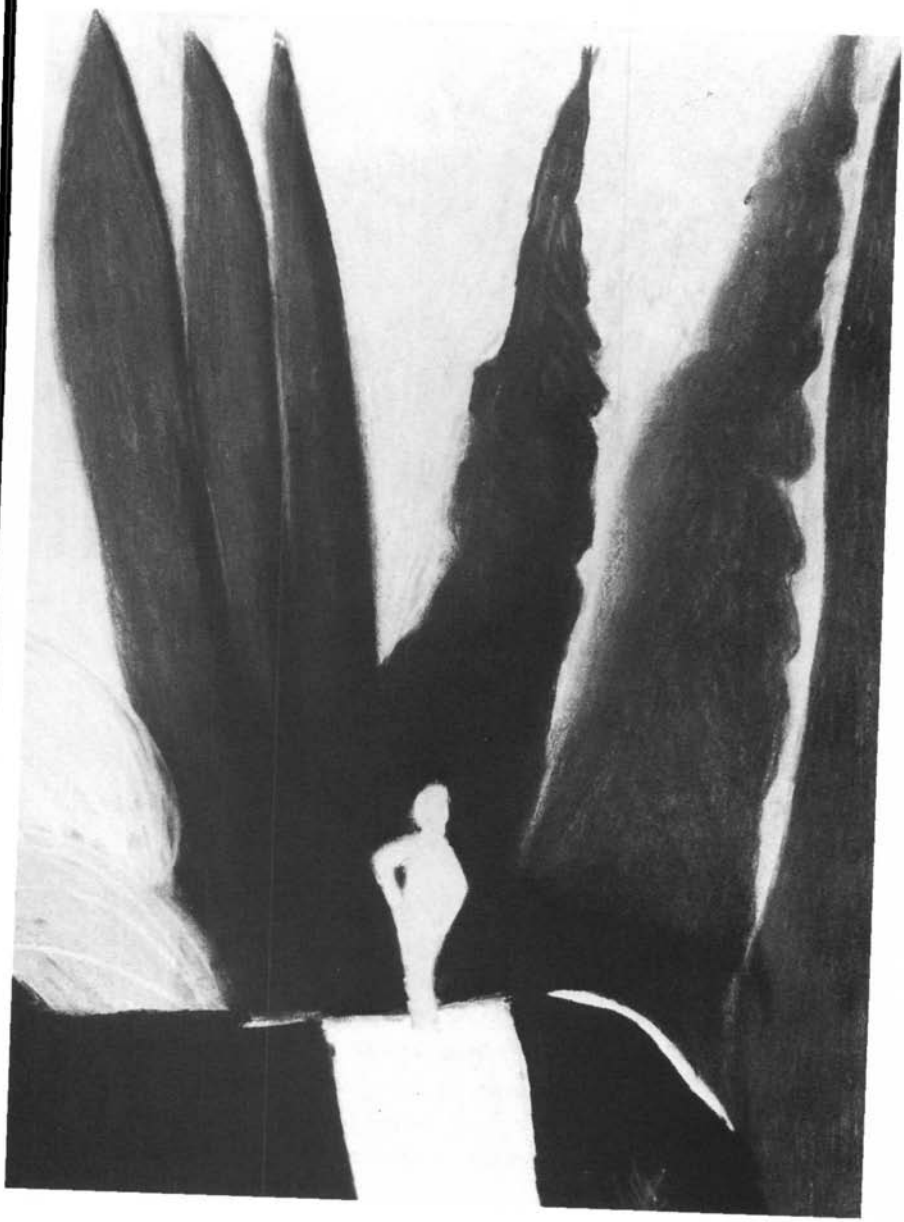

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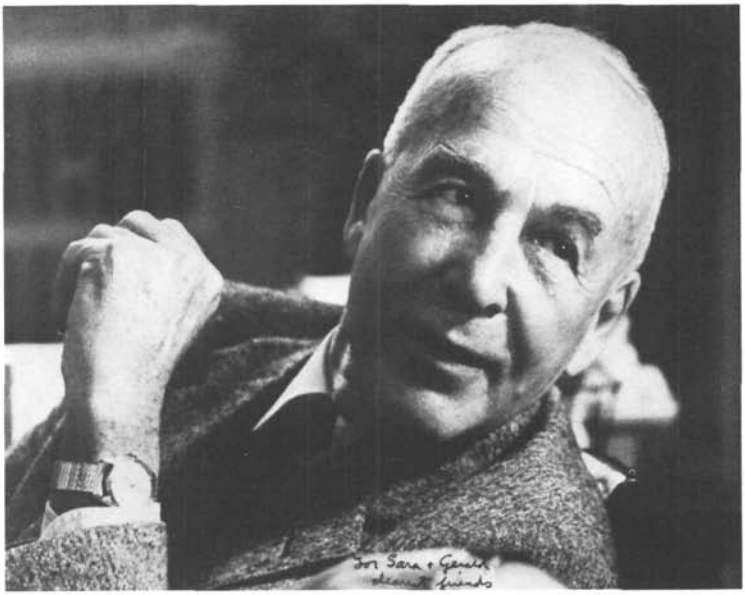

From the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Wm. Donnelly.

Archibald MacLeish: Selected Letters

Edited by Roy H. Winnick

Archibald MacLeish died just two-and-a-half weeks before May 7, 1982, when he would have celebrated his ninetieth birthday. He had accomplished what Robert Frost once said it was his *hope to accomplish: he had written a few poems it will be hard to get rid of. He had left his mark on the world in countless ways—as a lawyer, a journalist, a public servant, a teacher—but chiefly as a poet. In his poems, essays, speeches, interviews, and letters, as well as in the minds of generations of colleagues, students, and friends, he had left a presence that will also be hard to get rid of.*

The letters that follow, twenty-five or so in all, have been

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selected from Letters of Archibald MacLeish, 1907 to 1982, *to be published by Houghton Mifflin Company later this year. The letters in this excerpt span forty-two years; those in the book, seventy-five. The excerpt is a good introduction to the volume of letters and the latter (if, as its editor, I may be permitted to say so) is an even better introduction to MacLeish's long and extraordinarily varied life.*

In the fall of 1923 MacLeish took his wife, Ada, and their two children to France, where, in those days, American dollars enabled one to live on next to nothing. There, MacLeish planned to master the art of poetry, while Ada, a talented concert soprano, undertook a serious, if less than full-time, career as a professional singer. In the first of these letters, written some two-and-a-half years after their arrival abroad, MacLeish is trying—not for the first time—to make the acquaintance of T.S. Eliot, whose poems—especially The Waste Land *(1922)—had made, as MacLeish knew only too well, a rather too deep impression on his own work. (In May 1924 MacLeish and his poet-friend Phelps Putnam had journeyed to London from France in hopes of seeing the reclusive Eliot. When they had called at the bank where Eliot was employed, they had been informed by a bank manager that Mr. Eliot was "not in.") Eliot, who was editing* The New Criterion, *did not take the long poem MacLeish enclosed with his letter—which may have been "Einstein" or perhaps "Bleheris" (a section of* The Hamlet of A. MacLeish *[1928])—but he did accept and publish, in April 1926, MacLeish's poem beginning "No lamp has ever shown us where to look," and, the following year, "Land's End/For Adrienne Monnier."*

With Ezra Pound, who, as of late 1926, was just starting The Exile, *MacLeish had less success. He sent Pound "Bleheris," "Broken Promise," and several other poems, all of which Pound rejected on the grounds that they were too self-consciously poetic and, in some instances, too obviously derivative—of Ezra Pound. Another of the poems Pound rejected became one of MacLeish's best known: "You, Andrew Marvell." Pound complained, in rejecting it, that he, Pound, had used Persia in the* Cantos; *he advised, in all seriousness,*

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that MacLeish find a culture to write about that no one else had taken.

Later, as several of these letters indicate, MacLeish was instrumental in obtaining Pound's release from St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, where—who does not know the story?—Pound was confined thirteen years for his propaganda broadcasts over Radio Rome during World War II. As Librarian of Congress, as a Roosevelt insider, and as a former practicing lawyer, MacLeish was in a good position to help Pound, and help him he did, beginning the day after Pound's 1943 indictment for treason. Pound had other champions—including Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, and—how unlikely!—Robert Frost. But the stage manager of the behind-the-scenes drama that resulted in Pound's release was MacLeish. It was, as these letters show, an often thankless—if ultimately rewarding—job.

MacLeish did not meet Pound until 1939 and saw him, I believe, only once thereafter; and though they exchanged dozens of letters during the fifties, they could not be called friends, nor, I think, could MacLeish and Eliot. Ernest Hemingway was another story. MacLeish told Carlos Baker that from their first meeting in the summer of 1924 until the MacLeishes returned to the States in 1928, Hemingway was as close to Archie (and Ada) MacLeish as he was to any other friend. The letters they exchanged, beginning in the spring of 1926, suggest a relationship that was robust, unguarded, deeply affectionate—and doomed. "And what became of him?" MacLeish asked of Hemingway in his 1948 poem "Years of the Dog," and answered: "Fame became of him." Whether it was Hemingway's meteoric rise to fame while MacLeish's own career as a poet was having some difficulty getting off the ground, or Hemingway's disapproving response when, in October 1929, MacLeish accepted a job as a writer on Fortune, *Henry Luce's new business magazine, or the natural antagonism of two strong and competitive egos, it is difficult to say. What can be said is that by the end of the 1930s what had once been a central friendship for MacLeish existed more in memory than in fact. In the last quarter-century of Heming-*

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way's life (though they continued to exchange occasional letters by means of which some of the old fondness was rekindled), they met only once.

From 1949 until his retirement in 1962 MacLeish was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, where he had attended law school, taught constitutional law, and served as curator of the Nieman Foundation until World War II. In his advanced writing course, English S (admission to which was competitive and much coveted), and in his poetry lecture course, MacLeish made friends of a new generation of young writers—and in part helped to create it. And, since he lived for twenty years after leaving Harvard, involved in the world to the very end, still more young writers, and more young people generally, were added to the long list of his close friends. MacLeish outlived almost the whole of his own literary generation, and very nearly the next as well. (He says, poignantly and perfectly, what that felt like in his poem "Survivor.") John Dos Passos, to whom the last letter in this excerpt is addressed, died two years after it was written.

And now Archie, too, is gone, having died peacefully, gracefully, as one hoped and knew he would. I am glad I knew him. I am going to miss him. But one can read these letters, and those poems, and remember. "Before, though, Paris was wonderful. . . ."

***Note:** In this excerpt, as in the book from which it is taken, MacLeish's occasionally idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation have been preserved intact. Material in square brackets was interpolated by the editor.*

TO T.S. ELIOT

Dear Mr. Eliot: 21 February [1926] [Paris?]

I can imagine no good reason why you should publish a poem of mine of this length.[1] But I send it nevertheless in the hope that you may unreasonably like it enough to excuse its

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bulk.

I was disappointed to miss you last spring when (I believe) you lunched with Mme de Bassiano.[2] It isn't because I think that I could tell you better verbally than I have already done in ink how much I owe you (indeed you must be only too painfully conscious of it if you ever happen on my *Pot of Earth*). It's simply that you're becoming legendary and I have a very human desire to look at you. Seriously I'd take it most kindly if you would let me know when next you pass through Paris. It will save you a lot of importuning and give me the greatest pleasure.

faithfully yours Archibald MacLeish

1. MacLeish (hereinafter referred to as M) may have sent Eliot the manuscript of "Einstein," for possible publication by *The New Criterion* (of which Eliot was editor). *The North American Review* had purchased the poem two years earlier but had never printed it. 2. The Princess Bassiano was the former Marguerite Chapin, sister of Katherine Garrison Chapin; also known as Marguerite Caetani, she was the owner of the French literary journal *Commerce*, which was edited by Paul Valéry, Valéry Larbaud, and Léon-Paul Fargue. In post-war years she was the publisher of *Botteghe Oscure*, to which M contributed.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY[1]

Dear Ernest: [*c.* June 1926] [Antibes]

For it is Ernest isn't it? How is your life? Have any sweet and deep things been happening to you? Have you plunged into any wells of living water? And in general how do you? I feel very sad. Miss Simpsin is playing old English airs—I think they are airs—on the piano below stairs and it has been raining all day and the sea isn't what you took it for and I have thought of a new way to represent the process of dying—or is it dieing? Dye if you would be with Adonais. Also my testicles give me no end of trouble at these interseasonal periods. I'm one of your late generators. Of all times of the year save me the necessity of procreation in the spring. Sheep breed in the spring. But come at me with your dreaming Aphrodites of an off winter evening or just as summer putting back her drawers draws down the hither

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hand of autumn or about the holy solstice whenas old earth doth turn her other rump and I can get you cabbages upon the very body of corrupted death. Or thereabouts. Nothing other works for me at all. I have been seven days over a thirty line soliloquy for my redraft of 'amlet.[2] And last night Scott [Fitzgerald] told me he was thinking of selling the serial rights to the World's Fair to some magazine or other for thirty-five thousand deollars! I know I can't write fiction now. How is the escaped convict getting on? Jake stays with me. So does Ashby. So do bulls. So do fish and fern leaves. A lot of stuff like the memories you bring back for yourself from a week like that. As they go farther back they don't lose vitality. My one criticism is the one I gave you—and from me worth nothing—that the novel is less of a block than your best stories are.[3] But I don't see how it can help but be a success, both d'estime and d'argent. It has got the one rare thing—common life. And so much more. Thanks so much for the books for K.[4] When I get where I can find out the price of an Everyman ed. I'll reimb.. Till when my secret thanks. I've made a list of all the good people in the world. There are nineteen of which you are seven.

Why not meet again yrs aff'ly Archie

1. M had met Hemingway (1899–1961) at the Closerie des Lilas in Paris in the summer of 1924, and the MacLeishes saw much of him in Paris, Antibes, and elsewhere until their return from abroad. Thereafter, M and Hemingway saw one another less frequently, and the MacLeish-Hemingway friendship was punctuated by a number of unpleasant episodes that led, eventually, to almost complete estrangement. 2. M's *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928). 3. Hemingway had brought with him to the Riviera the carbon copy of his as-yet-unpublished novel *The Sun Also Rises*, which M (as well as Fitzgerald and, perhaps, others) had immediately read. 4. M's son Kenneth.

TO PRINCESS BASSIANO [MARGUERITE CAETANI]

Dear Princess Bassiano 1 January 1927 Gstaad [, Switz.]

Forgive my delay in answering your two letters. My attempts to learn skiing have had a fairly disastrous effect on my thumb-joint and I have had to *forego* the making of small curves for almost a week. I can hardly claim to have learned to ski either.

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Which deprives me of whatever consolation.

About American contributions to Commerce. I am always glad to be of any service I can. I believe in Commerce and that would be quite enough even if there were not more. I wrote Wylie,[1] Cummings and Dos Passos before I left Paris (Dec. 20). We should hear from Wylie at once, from Cummings shortly if ever, and from Dos Passos when he gets back from Mexico. I have also been after Hemingway (the success of whose last novel is spectacular and will shortly put him in that category of the contemporary great where he least desires to see himself). Hemingway promises a good story for February first if not before. As to myself, if I can *break* through certain difficulties that are now besetting me, I shall have something for you in February or March. It is hard going just now because I have come to the end of *one run* and have got to turn. And these turns are hard. Particularly on a stiff slope. And with rutted snow. O—Aiken. I have asked him. As yet nothing has come. I think it will.

And I'm glad about Beaulieu.[2] I hope you won't feel the Mistral.

And that brings me to what I want to say to you about Perse.[3] I had no idea where the books came from. But I had long heard of Leger Leger and I wanted to read him under any name. So I started *Anabase*. There are three or four books in a writer's life which are like the changes of direction in a long valley—the cols where the world opens up again and you take a breath and go on. *Anabase* is such a book to me. I believe it is very great poetry. But I cannot tell. It is too close to me. Perse—let him deny it—is my blood brother. Infinitely wiser and infinitely better. But mine. You will see that I cannot thank you for that gift. But that I am grateful with all my heart please believe.

More when I hear from America. yours Archie MacLeish

1. Elinor Wylie (1885–1928), the American poet then married to William Rose Benét. 2. Unidentified. 3. Alexis Saint-Léger Léger (1889–1975), the French poet and diplomat who wrote under the pseudonym St.-John Perse, later became a close friend of M's.

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TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: [*c.* 14 February 1927] [Paris]

Just to ack. receipt of *Pursuit Race*[.]

All I am, in this business, is a gadget for receiving & forwarding. As I told you before in re *Alpine Idyll* I do *no editorial work* for any man including Barsiano. Anything you want to publish I receive & send on. And I say nothing to nobody.* [*MacLeish wrote in the margin:* *no expressions of opinion. I can't do it without being either your agent or a lady editor. And I don't want to be either.] B. understands that perfectly. You'll hear from her direct. If she takes the story let me know at once & I'll write her for the money.[1]

Nothing to thank me for. I didn't suggest your name. All I did was talk up price.

Pound is crazy. Last letter he asked me to learn Arabic so as to write like myself. Also have something to talk to him about when we met. I'm getting a bit fed up with the Ezraic assumption that he is a Great Man. Let the rest of us say so for a while. Nothing on earth is worse than a literary gent talking about his own stuff.

Had an idea about [Sherwood] Anderson the other day. Trouble with Anderson is he thinks naïveté & honesty are the same thing. Which they damn well aren't. Honesty is very hard. You may have to write like H. James to be honest. Or you may have to write like the primer to be honest. But to assume that because you sound childish you are therefore true is the real bunk. But I've met him since my last letter & I like him. He told me about your correspondence over the Torrents.[2] Them letters ought to be published. They sound just grand. Love to Pfeif & Pfeiffer[3] & to Pappy A.

1. *Commerce* did not publish either of Hemingway's stories. 2. Hemingway's *Torrents of Spring* (1926). 3. Pauline and Virginia Pfeiffer.

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At Pamplona, Spain, '30s: clockwise, Gerald Murphy (in hat); Sara Murphy; Pauline (EH wife #2); EH; Hadley (EH wife #1).

From the collection of Mrs. Francis Brennan.

Archie and Ada at Bizy-Vernon, France, country house of Richard and Alice Lee Myers, July, 1924. (Photo: Richard Myers)

From the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Wm. Donnelly.

Ernest Hemingway and Honoria Murphy (Donnelly), Montana-Vermala, Switzerland, 1929.

Archie & Ada MacLeish and Sara & Gerald Murphy in Vienna, 1927. (Photo: Richard Myers)

From the collection of Mrs. Francis Brennan.

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TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: 18 September [1927] Ashfield [, Mass.

That was damn fine of you and made me feel grand.[1] I don't expect our mutual affection to run to our works—though yours have always had mine—but it takes all the crums out of the bed to have your praise. And aside from all that it gives me a lot of confidence I need awful bad after a summer in this melon eating land where Millay is a great poet, Tate is a great man of letters and only man is vile.

Thank you.

We laughed ourselves sick over Pauline's epistle. The touch about Sara [Murphy] and the gypsy girl was—is—immortal. I hope you have had as good a time as it sounds. Though it doesn't seem humanly possible to have so good a time. We have been buying and selling houses and now that we have a fine one we spend all our time thinking about it which is all right but not productive of much. However when its done it will be worth the trouble. If you'll spend some time in it.

We'll be back in November and see that you're in Paris. And write once anyway before that.

The Bullitts[2] are a pair of deuces. And not wild either. Bill has just discovered the Free Life—at fifty thousand a year. And Louise is always trying to play the Dowager Queen with a tin monocle and a pair of property tights. They make Archie ache.

Fifty Grand in French! It was fine. But the poor French will never know what they missed. French is a hell of a language. But it was a grand test of that story. To have it go over like that even in N.R.F. language was a triumph. Your theory about the good stuff always translating is bunk. Nobody else can write your kind of stuff within twelve laps of you. And how in hell do you expect a hack translator to do it. A writer writes with words not plots like Bloofield.[3] And the words are different. They aint the same words. No, your theory is bunk. But your story is a knockout and no foul either. Even in French I got hollow in the solar plexus.

Take the history of the same piece in the Atlantic. Bob[4] tells me the thing was full column news in every paper in the east.

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They reviewed it like a book. And old Sedgwick[5] was as proud of himself as though he had had a baby. Went around telling the folks downtown how many cancellations he had had. It was the big event of the year in these parts.

Next to Sacco and Vanzetti.[6] That was a stink. Nobody cared. The only decent fight was put up by the defenders of our ancient institutions. The communists used it for propaganda but the only birds to get in jail were the sons of Boston's oldest families and the New York Poets. They had the jail covered with machine guns the night of the execution but not a shot was fired. I'll enclose the story in the local paper. Now its all stale and no one will talk about it. Wash their hands. The only trouble is that it must have hurt Sacco and Vanzetti a little to be killed. The fight has gone out of these people. Me for instance. I was wild about it. So I argued a long time with some Boston lawyers and then changed the subject. A great race. Stink. Luke warm. Spew them out. And perhaps the boys were really guilty. O hell!

love to you both a[nd] Jinney who's in Portugal

A.

1. Probably a reference to Hemingway's praise of M's "Land's End/For Adrienne Monnier." 2. William C. Bullitt (1891–1967), a member of the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. His wife, Louise, was formerly married to John Reed, the American communist. The Bullitts were neighbors of the MacLeishes in Ashfield, Massachusetts. 3. Louis Bromfield. 4. Robert N. Linscott, M's editor at Houghton Mifflin Company. 5. Ellery Sedgwick, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. 6. Italian-born anarchists whose execution on Aug. 22, after repeated appeals of their 1921 conviction for robbery and murder, had been attended by intense international protest.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: 14 December [1928] Conway [, Mass.]

There is nothing to say. There is never anything to say about death.[1] Except that it made us know how much we love you to read those words in the paper. Certainly beyond that anything is an impertinence. I know how the death of your father changes him in your mind and he becomes what he was when

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you were very young and your heart is destroyed with tenderness for him. No one can talk to you then. You are walking in your own boyhood and everyone is very far away.

But there is one thing I am going to say to you whether I should or not. You must not let your mind work over and over the way it happened. I know how your mind works round and round your pain like a dog in cover going over and over the same track and what a torment it is to you. But now you must not. It is too serious. The consequences to you are too grave. I don't know how you are going to help it. I know that what I have written is just so much language. But I believe that you can oppose that agony and end it. Somehow. I beg you to fight it in every way you can. And to forgive me if what I have written is more than I have a right to say.

This is not the time to thank you for your letter about my poem. You must know how much I have always wanted to please you. But it was more than that here. The book [*The Hamlet of A. MacLeish*] has been received with perfunctory notices and tepid hostility. (Except for [Lincoln] Kirstein's magazine where it was violently attacked!)[2] I had hoped everything from it. Your letter gave me a rock to stand on in the seas of shit—a rock I wouldn't exchange for all their continents.

Sometime I will tell you what you did for me.

For now—there is nothing you can ask me to do for you in your unhappiness I will not gladly do. Believe it.

My love to Pauline and Bumby and you Archie

1. Dr. Clarence E. Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway's father, had shot and killed himself on Dec. 6. 2. R.P. Blackmur, "Am Not Prince Hamlet Nor Was Meant to Be," *Hound & Horn* 2 (Winter 1929), 167–169.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: 1 September 1929 [Conway]

I have just finished the Sept. instal. .[1] I haven't anything to say. It is beautiful—beautiful beyond words. The seriousness & precision & candor of your writing makes you feel the way you

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feel after tears when everything is suddenly simple & profoundly clear & perfectly tender. I cannot think about Catherine without love for her nor of you without emotions which are simply not to be spoken. You see it is merely silly for me to attempt to talk of it. And yet I go on—there are two moments equal in tenor to the crisis of *The Killers*. And there is something you have never reached before—a deep & true pity with no irony & no self-consciousness. I was terribly moved by the lad under the canvas on the car. By Ferguson. By Catherine. By that night.

What has happened is that you have mastered the self-imposed problems of your technique. There was a time when I wondered whether the restrained & tense understatement of your prose would not limit you to a certain kind of material. Now no one can wonder that. The world of this book is a complete world, a world of emotion as well as of feeling. To subject the whole experience of a man's soul to the pure & perfect art of your prose is a great, a very great, achievement. I send you my complete praise & my profound respect. You become in one book the great novelist of our time. It is not for me to supply you with accolades and titles. But I *know*. And I am glad with all my heart. I think now you can forgive me my stupidity in Saragossa, for it was this achievement that I then wished for you. And do always wish. And, because I feel as I do about you, with no envy but with pride.

When can we meet? We shall be here in the spring—winter in Chicago. This house is yours.

Give my love to Pauline & forgive my literaryisms about the book. I know no other way to write. I hear praise of you on all sides from all kinds of people. You should be completely happy. Of course you won't be. You have planned so long a journey for yourself. But, for the rest of us, it is accomplished in this book. A.

1. Of *A Farewell to Arms*.

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TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Ambos Mundos:[1] [*c.* 31 May 1933] [New York]

I can only go backward by going forward and anyway what do you care about ten days in England[2] where there were if anything more English than I can conveniently remember and a hell of a lot of the island itself which I had the more or less bad fortune to see from the air over one whole Sunday when young bucko Selfridge[3] without any previous warning that I can recall hoisted me into the sky on the rumble seat of a Puss Moth (imagine any other country calling a machine a Puss Moth) and set me down at Cambridge and then hopped me somewhere into the west counties and set me down for tea and then eventually hopped me back to London. Then after that I had the bad luck to go across to Paris on the train the day before Good Friday so that every other bleeding tripper on the tight little isle was eating buns in my face so as not to have to eat that horrible French food. I had enough. By Yee I had enough. And when I got to the Gare de Nord (North Station) I almost kissed the taxi driver but he thought I was an Englishman too and told me he had worked in England seven years and if I could have gotten out I would have. And then when we got down to the Riviera the goddam Malta fleet was lying off every port between Saint Tropez and Jooan the Pines and at San Raphael damn if a launch didn't pull along side and let off a smartly dressed naval aide who pulled himself to attention and saluted me and me in a dirty blue set of dungarees with half my lunch in my cheek and he thought he was going to find a whole boat load of fine American girls and cocktails and I wasn't even polite to him and Ada gave me Hell but I had had enough of the English I had had enough. Of the English. Anyway Gerald's boat is fine.[4] It is built like a fishing boat with all the money in the hull where it belongs and in the decks and only light wood painted partitions inside except that Sara has had comfortable beds put in and there is a bathtub but you can't use that because it takes too much water. The only trouble is that with a crew of five you can't lift a finger and you just sit around and eat. But she sails fine and she is big enough to take anything and Vladimir much

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to my what do you call it was perfectly willing to go out in a Mistral and we did twice. His only trouble is that he keeps the motor going all the time to charge the battery because the frigidaire takes so much juice. Ada calls it a bateau à frigidaire. But it was a fine trip and we got a lot of rest and came back looking a little more like something you would choose than when we went away. When I got back I saw those stories in Scribners[5] and I will salute the orb and say that if old Pappy is going back then that is the way every young man on live would give his pants to be going. You are right about the Swiss stories. They are comprehensible. They are goddam comprehensible. And then too they are swell. They are very swell. Also they have the horse-power. They kept young man Kirstein awake all one night. He says so himself. You have no greater tribute than what poor Mr. Kirstein is forced to ejaculate. But I'll never convince you of that and I don't think I'll try. Mr. Kirstein is now writing about the ballet. Later on he will write about some other subject.

Mike [Strater] has moved out of his ten thousand dollar apartment and hopes to sublet for six. Next winter he is going to Arizona because of Maggie's sinus. Maggie and the children have been sick for the last three months straight and Mike has been playing nurse and he has had enough. He is going to Arizona.

Dos has sailed for the still vexed Antibbies. I saw him one evening. He looked like hell.[6] Very small in the face and with very big eyes and kind of yellow. Also Katie[7] not looking too well. They do need sun. Dos was sick about not getting down to Cuba but they told him at Johns Hopkins he couldn't lift a hand for a couple of months and he thought some of those fish mightnt get into the boat without a bit of a lift.

As for me—well its the same old hellofit. I am now doing a story on Morgan, a story on the Port of New York Authority and a story on Marshall Fields all for the August issue. And I can't even get to Conway for every weekend. Its lousy luck. And we are all getting older. How is the novel?[8] God I'd like to

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see a bit of it. Love to the beautiful Mrs. H. and to all your fine children and to you[.] Archie

1. The name of Hemingway's hotel in Havana, Cuba. 2. M had gone abroad to work on a *Fortune* series on the life and suicide of Ivar Kreuger, the Swedish financier and swindler. 3. A son, presumably, of the American-born Harry Gordon Selfridge, "the merchant prince of Oxford Street." 4. *Weatherbird*, a hundred-foot schooner designed and built for the Gerald Murphys by Vladimir Orloff. 5. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "Homage to Switzerland," and "Give Us a Prescription, Doctor" (the last later retitled "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio"), had appeared in, respectively, the March, April, and May 1933 issues of *Scribner's Magazine*. 6. Dos Passos had suffered an attack of rheumatic fever. 7. Katharine (Katy) Smith, Mrs. Dos Passos. 8. Hemingway was in fact working on a new book of short stories, *Winner Take Nothing*, which was published in Oct. 1933 and dedicated to "A. MacLeish." When M thanked him for the compliment, Hemingway wryly reminded him that there were two A. MacLeishes.

TO ERNEST AND PAULINE HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy and Paulinos: [*c.* April 1936] [Tokyo]

You had ought to see the beautiful islands of Japan.[1] It is indeed a wonderful sight. The pee-pul are quite small and mostly covered with babies. They fold up into very small spaces and can be inserted where you wouldn't think. In this country it is impolite to blow your nose or wear shoes but quite general to hawk, spit, belch and appear in your socks. We smell of butter to the inhabitants but they do not smell of anything to us: they are in fact remarkably clean which is attributed by learned travellers to the fact that they bathe. I myself attribute it to the fact that they do not smell. All the trains in this country are uncomfortable and on time. It is an interesting combination. There is a bird in this country who sits in bamboo groves and makes a certain sound. He is known as the Japanese nightingale. The reason why he is known as the Japanese nightingale is that he sings in the day-time. Many things are similarly turned about with these interesting and artistic people who are naturally different from ourselves since it is Wednesday here when it is Yesterday morning where you are. For example the countryside

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in spring smells of earth and rain in your country but here with us it doesn't smell of earth and rain. It smells of crap. This odor is valued by the people as a sign of good rice both past and to come. In some remote areas where I have been the smell of crap is very expensive indeed and most impressive. I could go on at some length to tell you more of the habits and customs of this nation but it would hardly be worth while because you would not reply. I know because I sent you a post card from Salt Lake Utah USA and you never replied. It is improbable that you are dead because I have since seen in the local prints a picture of Mr. Hemingstein the famous author and bitters taster upright between two objects one of which was said to be a Sales Fish and the other a Movie Queen. The one that had its tail up was the fish. This picture was said to have appeared originally in the New York Times and though it did not flatter either the fish or Mr. Hemingway who remains in my opinion one of the most beautiful of Anglo-Saxon males nevertheless I was able by certain stigmata to identify the aforesaid bitters bugler and there was and is no doubt but that you are not dead. If you prefer to appear so for reasons of polity I can only object that goddam it you aint. My wife Mrs. MacLeish who knows the Japanese word for can* sends you her neatly folded love. yrn affly and as ever
Archie

*She learned it on a train. If you shd ever need to know it it is benjo. It is very well known here.

1. M was in Japan to research and write a series of articles on that country for the September 1936 issue of *Fortune*.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: [*c.* 24 September 1936] [Conway]

And that would have been a fine thing to do too.[1] Only the dates are the wrong way to. I'm about half way or better through the three months I have off and a long job left to do. I don't know really why I keep on at it. I go on turning up stones

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in the hope, so far fanciful, of finding my own picture underneath in the worm cast. Its never really mine. You can make it out more or less the way you can make an elephant out of a cloud. What is the necessity? I no longer suffer from the delusion if I ever did which I doubt that I have anything to add to the sum total of man's knowledge of the universe. As for giving pleasure I can give more with a case of good Scotch and be thanked for it. Besides which I have no particular desire to give pleasure. Besides which the equation of pleasure given against pain spent won't work out. The personal anguish in bringing out a book so far as I am concerned is simply unspeakable: the praise because I know it unearned is as bad as the blame which I think earned whether it is or not. If it weren't for that I could imagine that I wrote books for the same reason that they put scaffolding around a rotten peace [*sic*] of stone work—to support a self-confidence which won't stand by itself. But the actual repeated pain of the performance knocks that theory into a cocked hat. I'm left at the end of the row with nothing more philosophic than this—that I keep at it because nothing on earth makes me as happy as I am for about twenty minutes after I've finished a poem—and that I wouldn't be as happy as that (for some inexplicable reason) unless I knew that I would go ahead and smash the happiness by publishing the thing. It isn't just having something to do. I can work my hair out twelve hours a day at Fortune and have no happiness—only the kind of jag which comes from using up time in a necessary duty. My own work is the precise opposite. There's no fun in doing it as there is fun in doing a piece of journalism but there does come briefly at the end and soon lost something that the greatest piece of journalism ever attempted is incapable of giving. The world is really lousy isn't it? It ought to be possible to make the things you want to in a kind of innocence of labor and have them remain what they are when you make them—not what they are when they become "literature"—or don't.

None of this ever happens to you and therefore it will sound idiotic to you. You will wonder why, if it is as bad as that, I don't simply stay drunk. Which is the question.

I am glad you are at work on a novel.[2] I do wish you luck. Not

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because you ask for it and not because you need it but because your success is curiously essential to me—as though the unarguable reality and invention of your work made up for the dough-tasting inadequacy I find in most of mine. I wish I were a believing Baptist and knew for certain that everything would be made clear in the end.

Have you looked at Mr. Huxley's I-less in Gaza?[3] It reads the way a thumbed plumb tastes—all fingered over with the pale cast of thought. Mr. Huxley's world is a prick on which the Bertillion system has been demonstrated by a penitentiary full of British intellectuals. Wherein it resembles Tom-boy Anthony Eden.[4]

My love to Pauline and her men

yrs always and forgive the gloom Archie

1. Hemingway had invited M to visit him in Montana. 2. Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937). 3. Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936). 4. The British foreign minister.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Ernest: 27 July 1943 [Washington]

I am sending you, under separate cover, a set of negative photostats of transcripts of Ezra Pound's broadcasts. Monday they indict him for treason, Tuesday I send you the evidence. Prompt service I call it.[1]

I haven't been able to read them all, but it is pretty clear that poor old Ezra is quite, quite balmy. What motivates him primarily is apparently the fact that he just plain doesn't like Jews. Also, there is that Major Douglas bug he swallowed.[2] Plus his conviction that he has read American history—which the facts don't seem to support.

Anyway, it is a very sad business. What will save him, if anything does, is the fact that no jury on earth could think this kind of drivel would influence anybody to do anything, anywhere, at any time.

I can find only one reference to you. He says you once told

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him he was the only American who ever got out of England alive. I can't find any references to myself in this batch, though there were plenty about a year ago. However, in one or two broadcasts, he is quite eloquent about the fact that America was promises.[3]

I will reply to your fine epistle from *Pilar* in a day or two, but I wanted to get this batch of stuff off to you.

Poor old Ezra! Treason is a little too serious and a little too dignified a crime for a man who has made such an incredible ass of himself, and accomplished so little in the process.

Faithfully yours, Archie

1. The Federal Communications Commission had been monitoring Pound's broadcasts over Radio Rome since 7 Dec. 1941; Pound had been indicted in U.S. District Court, District of Columbia, on July 26. 2. C. H. Douglas (1879–1952), English economist who devised the theory of Social Credit. 3. A reference to M's poem "America Was Promises," first published in *New Republic* 101 (8 Nov. 1939), 46–48.

TO HARVEY H. BUNDY[1]

Dear Harvey: 10 September 1943 [Washington]

You have certainly had no time these very busy days to think about an American poet, who has been living in Italy for the last ten years or so, named Ezra Pound. My excuse for writing you about him is this:

Pound has been broadcasting for the Fascists over the last year and has been indicted for treason by a grand jury in, I think, the District. Since there is no question whatever but that he was engaged in propaganda for the Fascist government, the indictment was understandable enough. In any case, it is not the fact of the indictment which worries me or any of the other writers who have been disturbed about the problem. What bothers us is the possibility that summary action might be taken by Allied military quarters in Italy as we occupy the country and that the result might be to create a situation of considerable potential unhappiness. The result, that is to say, might be to confer the paraphernalia of martyrdom upon a half-cracked

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and extremely foolish individual and to bring down upon this government the kind of criticism this government should not have to face.

Both Ernest Hemingway and I have gone through the monitorings of the Pound broadcasts. We agree entirely that they are the product of a completely distracted mind. I won't ask you to undergo the boredom of reading them, but you can take it from me that they are obscene, rambling, spiteful, and altogether foolish. Pound, who has written as good poetry as has appeared in his lifetime, seems to have gone completely to pieces under the pressure of a swollen and dropsical ego. Briefly, he feels he has not been appreciated at home and he has taken it out in babbling correspondence with people at home which has now turned into babbling broadcasting which, in form at least, comes awfully close to treason.

I am not asking you, however, to think of the problem in terms of Pound, or Pound's reputation. The real question seems to me to be a question of the way in which this government should treat as tragi-comic a figure. You undoubtedly recall the case of Clement C. Vallandingham of Ohio, who, having started out as opposed to the Civil War, ended up as an active propagandist for the south and a violent and vicious opponent of the President. It has always seemed to me that Lincoln's handling of that situation was a model of justice as well as of taste. Vallandingham, as you recall, was sent across the lines to the Confederates. The Confederates, considering him a traitor to the north, would have none of him, and he finally ended up in Canada, where he died obscurely just before the end of the war.

If you agree with me that the Pound case has potential elements of importance in terms of government policy, I wonder if you won't feel like suggesting to the Secretary that orders be given to prevent any summary disposition of the case by the military authorities in Italy. If time is allowed to pass and Pound is brought to civil trial, or if his case is handled as the Vallandingham case was handled, there is, I think, no question

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but that his punishment will very precisely fit his crime.

Always,

Faithfully yours, [Archie]

1. Bundy, an old friend of the MacLeish family and formerly M's personal attorney, was serving as Assistant Secretary of War under Henry L. Stimson.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ezra: [*c.* August 1955] [Conway]

Yours of the 4 Aug.. I haven't been in Washington since that winter day when I got snowed in at a female seminary outside of Baltimore and was unable to make the rest of the trip. Next time I'm down you'll see me if you'll let me come.

If there's a service to the arts which *you* think is a service to the arts I'd like to know about it. No man alive has served them more faithfully than you. Can you tell me what it is?

But the service to the arts I should most like to see performed is the service which would give you some peace and quiet in which to work. You and I differ politically, and I regard your views about the late war about as you regard mine, but I have always been and still am, as you know, of one mind with those who HAVE minds about your work.

I have been told by personal friends of yours that nothing is to be done—that no solution would be acceptable to you which did not involve vilification of President Roosevelt and those who served the Republic under him. If that is so its so—but I'd like to hear it from you before I accept it as the truth.

If all this is none of my business you can and will tell me to go to Hell as you have done in the past. But if the report I have heard is untrue and if there is a feasible solution of the whole problem I'd like to know it.

yours faithfully Archie

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TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ez: 18 August [1955] [Conway]

Thank you for a friendly and highly informative letter. I hope to get to Washington in the middle of the fall sometime. I'll let you know in advance in the hope that you will let me come out to see you.

Meantime I am going to assume—please tell me at once if I am wrong—that you would agree to what would be called, I suppose, a medical disposition of the problem: meaning by that, a disposition based on medical opinion, as distinguished from a legal or political (whatever that would be) disposition.

I don't know what I can do. Even in a medical disposition the Administration would have to act and I am not exactly grata in this Administration. But at least, if my assumption is correct, I will do what I can and try to instigate others who can do more. I don't mean by this, organization or, least of all, publicity. I mean the only kind of action that ever really counts—individual action in individual terms.

About the painter whom you do not name (I suppose I can get his name from—by—a glance at the Hudson Review) I'd like to help if I can.[1] What needs to be done? I know nobody in Va who can roll a log over. I enclose the color print which is fine too. faithfully Archie

1. The unnamed artist was Sheri Martinelli, a frequent visitor to Pound at St. Elizabeths, whose painting entitled "Leucothoe" had appeared as a frontispiece in *The Hudson Review* 8 (Spring 1955), immediately preceding Pound's Cantos 86 and 87.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ez: [*c.* September 1955?] [Conway]

On the contrary—I'm proud to be seen writing you and don't give a gd gd dm who reports it. Wrote you at the other address because Achilles, golden hero, so advised.[1] Said he did it himself.

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Your reply is as clear as an oracle. Precisely. Selloi oak has nothing on old Ez.

When you say I am overlooking the simple and direct solution WHAT do you mean? I have heard talk of a "presidential pardon". But surely you don't mean that. A man can't be pardoned for something he has never been convicted of. You aint been convicted of nothing.

WHAT is simpler and more obvious than what I suggested? Please be specific. I don't want to undertake something you don't want me to undertake. I therefore wait upon your word. But please, Oh Lord, send it in unmistakable form. I may not be able to accomplish anything at all (a Republican would be better) but the one thing I want to avoid is making things worse for you by attempting what you don't want attempted.

yrs AMacL

1. Achilles Fang, a research fellow in Far Eastern languages at Harvard University.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ezra: 3 March [1956] [Antigua]

A batch of yr letters got forwarded to me on this Leeward—place makes me think of yr Second Canto—the Mediterranean has more behind it in the way of human bones but the water here is finer in color and clarity than anything you ever saw off Rapallo and the sun is more violent and also—honesty compels—the drought is dryer. No one is allowed to flush a toilet on this coast unless the contents will (forgive the specificity) no longer stir. You brush yr teeth in rum (which taste awful with Colgates) and stay in the water as long as possible which keeps you from knowing how you smell yourself. Nothing can keep you from knowing how the rest smell. Food is out of cans—British mostly!—and though the sea is full of fish its a festival when the fishermen catch as much as one grouper or snapper. Otherwise its heavenly if heaven is still what they used to say it was. We live in three cinder block rooms, keep peering

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around for clouds, play Mozart, who goes well with the blue, on the victrola and read like wood lice. I'm trying to finish a verse play[1] but that won't interest you! (Even I can learn.)

I won't try to answer your letter about why did we let the Russians into the war. If you have read anything you've been reading McCarthy. Unless it's MacArthur. Why don't you read the sources? Why don't you read Stimson who was a Republican and no admirer of FDR? Why don't you read anything except what you do read? You have founded a whole position on an almost complete ignorance of your own country and its too late to do anything about it. Whenever I talk about your poetry which I do (for my own pleasure) a lot, youngsters jump down my throat with questions about your History. I reply that you haven't got any and that it doesn't matter but they won't let it go at that. Incidentally, your theory about the Russians getting into Berlin is—as you have probably forgotten—precisely Mr. Churchill's. You haven't had a decent word to say for him for thirty years if ever. Well, to Hell with it. I'm not going to argue McCarthyisms with a poet of your stature. I'm not even going to admit to myself that you are full of them.

Library of Congress bothers me. Plenty. I had a solemn promise that you would get books as requested. Since the shadowy business about Sprague Coolidge[2] I wonder if there's anybody IN there anymore. As for the bindery—I agree. Its dreadful. So dreadful I didn't even try to tackle it in the reorganization of the Institution. I was saving that for when I had some boards under my feet. Next thing I knew I was in the State Department and treading water.

Harvard. Another example of the indictment based on no evidence. I am not much of a teacher having been at it not over six years but if I know what a university ought to be that place is a university. You remember that crack in the Cantos—Teach? At Harvard, teach?—well it damn well can be done and is. The gents you propose have long been used as you propose they shd. Only improvement I would like to see of major variety

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would be to get you into the teaching there yourself. The lads would learn. So would you.

yrs Archie

1. *J.B.: A Play in Verse*, published by Houghton Mifflin Company in Mar. 1958, first performed at the Yale Drama School the following month, and successfully produced on Broadway beginning in Dec. 1958. 2. Albert Sprague Coolidge had been denied a $250-a-year position as adviser to the Coolidge Foundation, which his mother had endowed at the Library of Congress, after an F.B.I. check had turned up "derogatory information" about him—presumed to be his past membership on the "subversive" North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ez: 17 April [1956] Conway

Got back here couple of days ago to find eight foot drift where the yard ought to be. T'wuz a relief after that island which got baked to a cookie the last few weeks but still I'd like to see ground. Stopped off for a sight of Ernest in Habana on the way up—first view of the precipice in more than twenty yrs. He was off to Peru to catch gigantic marlin for forthcoming film of Old Man and Sea and was consequently totally surrounded by doctors taking his blood pressure and pricking his ear lobe but seemed otherwise in fine shape as did his wife Mary who is his finest wife with only possible exception of Pauline who was as fine a wife as anybody has a right to have. Wonderful dinner with ortolans and other rarities. No literary conversation which was a great relief—a relief which can always be counted on with Pappy. Learned for first time of death of that great prosateur and agriculturist Mr. L. Bromfield, once of Paris, later of the Republican Party.[1] Seems Mr. Bromfield died (first in radio, then in pictures) of hepatitis. Which occasioned pleasant song on primitive model. Otherwise no news except what won't be news to you—that the consensus of opinion gathered from my Republican friends and political acquaintances is that it would

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be unwise as well as useless to approach Dept of Justice before the election. Number of reasons—among others that Brownell[2] is getting out regardless of election outcome. My notion therefore is to prepare for a serious approach to Department in November—not by me, naturally, but by someone who might be grata if, as I suspect, the Reps return. Unless you tell me not to I'm going to prepare to that end. When I go down to Cambridge wh. will have to be soon I'll inquire at the Press about the missing ms. yrn as usual Archie

1. Louis Bromfield had died on March 18. 2. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ez: 5 July [1956] [Conway]

Yours of the 27th was a great help. I'm beginning to see if not the light at least the direction of the light. I don't mean the substance of your argument but its tendency. At least its relevance to the decision we have to make—or you have to make, for my wish in this matter is to follow your wish.

A word first about substance. When you say that FDR and others would murder any man who suggests taking Article One, Section 3 Para 3 seriously you are talking I suppose in parables. I:3:3 provides, of course, that you can't be a Senator until you are 30 and have been 9 years in the country and, further, that you must reside in the state from wh. you are elected. Which, equally of course, doesn't quite add up to reason for murder even if FDR had been what your fairy tale makes him out to be. I am equally bebaffled and bebuggered by your dark suggestion that the Supreme Court pays no mind to I:9:2 which provides that the privilege of habeas corpus shall not be suspended except when in invasion or rebellion the public safety requires. When? In what case? You will have to be a hell of a lot more specific to persuade me that FDR did not uphold the Constitution. Have you fallen for the Republican line on that? So far as I know no Republican above the level of McCormick[1]

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ever believed in it. Or maybe you now accept the bankers' doctrine that FDR let the Constitution down when we went off gold? And the same thing goes for your theory that Mussolini was the lad to stop Hitler and that we should have sat back and let him do it. We'd be sitting back still only the place would be Buchenwald. Why and how a man with your passion for truth and independence of mind and the art of poetry which you so superbly practise can fail to believe—to have believed and to believe still—in the supreme necessity of the war against Hitler beats me. Does your case against FDR really come down to anything else but the fact that he saw what Hitler was and dared to fight him and won? Until you can provide EVIDENCE other than dark hints and dirty adjectives I shall continue to believe that he was a very great president of the United States.

But this is by the way because the real significance of your letter to me is not its argument, which I don't accept, but the light it throws on the real issue between us. Let me be as specific as I can because this is important—and the time, as I have been saying, is running out.

I have been assuming that the objective is to get you out of St. Elizabeths.

I have further been assuming, on the basis of the best advice I can get (and I have talked to a lot of informed people) that the best—indeed the only—way of accomplishing that objective rapidly is to persuade the new Attorney General to nol pros the indictment.

My suggestions, and particularly the suggestion that I try to build up support among a few influential senators, have been directed to that end.

NOW

If I read your letter correctly you are saying that I am wrong not only in my suggestion as to method but in the objective itself: that what you want is as you put it "for a few people to learn the FACTS"—meaning, I take it, the facts about your position over the past many years of your life as a writer including the Rome broadcasts.

This is, of course, a perfectly reasonable thing to want —something any man might well want in your place or out of

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it.

But what it involves, as of course you realize, is a renewal of the trial—or a second trial if that is the proper procedure.

If that is what you want, then clearly I am way off base and should desist and withdraw.

BUT IS IT?

On that point I have to be absolutely clear. My position in all this is simple. I want to do what I can to get you out because it hurts me personally and seems to me a disgrace to the country that you are held there still after all these years. But obviously I am not going to do what *you* don't want done in order to end this pain and remove this disgrace.

Will you do one thing for me? Will you write me your answer to that specific question leaving all the arguments out for the moment? We can pick them up later any time you want—though I think there is very little chance we'll come out in agreement about anything except your integrity which I will never doubt: your information may be horse-crackers but your heart is sound. yrn Archie

1. Vance C. McCormick, newspaper publisher and former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, opposed President Roosevelt's bids for a third and fourth terms.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ez: [*c.* December 1956] [Cambridge]

Still waiting on Tom Eliot for his sig on letter. Ernest [Hemingway] seems to be in Paris and may have to try for somebody else—maybe Faulkner. Frost is standing by.

I aint coy. I simply don't want a "list" of names. Three good ones are better than fifty good ones.

We think we have a friend in the White House at down stairs level[1] who might be willing to cart the document to the Atty Gen who, it is surmised, will need bucking up.

There is only one thing sillier than believing everything in the papers and that is believing nothing in the papers. *Some-*

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body[2] was certainly in Clinton [Tennessee] blathering hatred and obscurantism at a lot of hillbillies and stirring them up to intimidate negro children. Was he impersonating yr friend? I don't like any part of it.

Also nothing shows your ignorance of the American scene more clearly than your belief that Harvard practices thought control or that a man could be fired from Harvard for teaching anything he had a mind to. He couldn't be and he never has been and there is almost no point of view that doesn't get taught here. You talk like a director of General Motors. Actually this is as close to a really free society as has existed in modern times. Don't make my anterior anatomy ache with that kind of nonsense.

You keep asking me what I read. What in Hell do YOU read to fill yr wits with gossip as uneducated as that?

yrn Archie

1. Christian A. Herter, Undersecretary of State. 2. John Kasper, a young bookseller-publisher who, under Pound's influence, had toured parts of the South denouncing racial integration, the Jews and the Supreme Court. His activities in Tennessee had recently resulted in his arrest, and the attendant publicity, in which Pound's name figured prominently, complicated the efforts to secure Pound's release.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: 19 June 1957 [Conway]

What a bloody goddam business! After everything you have had to take in the last few years to have to take that too! Of course I understand. I wouldn't let you come up even if you wanted to risk it because you shouldn't risk it and it isn't necessary.[1]

Let me answer your various questions about Ezra first.

(1) Ezra's attitude. I went down to see him in December of 55. Second time I'd ever seen him. What I saw made me sick and I made up my mind I wouldn't rest till he got out. Not only for his sake but for the good name of the country: after ten years it was beginning to look like persecution and if he died there

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we'd never wash the stain out. So I began writing him. Told him I had been informed by some alleged friend of his that he wouldn't accept out without a presidential pardon which would include an indictment of FDR. Told him he couldn't have a pardon because he had never been convicted of anything and as for FDR if FDR wasn't right in opposing Adolph and old Musso then I was the crazy boy and I ought to be in there too. We carried on along those lines for some reams of the usual kind of blather and finally I told him I had been talking to the lawyers all of whom agreed there was only one way out—to try to persuade the Atty Gen to nol pros the indictment. Would he accept that solution. More correspondence. Finally, yes—he would. He has stuck to that ever since and his solicitor in London whom Tom Eliot got me to write agrees also.

(2) Medical opinion. When I went down in winter of 55 I went to see Dr. Overholzer[2] who is the head of St. Elizabeths. Good psycho (Harvard) and good man. He told me he would let Ez out in eighteen minutes if the Dept of Justice would nol pros the indictment. Said he had never thought Ez's "treason" amounted to much anyway. That, however[,] was '55. Last fall when I had gotten Ez to agree (or, more accurately, when *he* had agreed) to the nol pros I wrote Overholzer again. This time he was much more cautious: told me I ought not to talk about Ez's "release" but only about the nol prossing of the indictment. Said he was not at all sure Ez could be released at once but was still certain the indictment ought to be dropped so that the problem would become medical merely. I interpreted this to mean—and I may be wrong—that Ez has gone off a bit but that, with the indictment out of the way, and the pressure off, it might be possible to ease him out into more bearable surroundings and, in any case, to get the U. S. and A. out from under. I therefore told Tom Eliot, who has been a bit nervous about the whole thing, that this was a two-bites-to-the-cherry case and that we had best take the first bite first. Frost, who doesn't like Ezra from London days (and with pretty good reason) never boggled at all. He may not like Ez but he wants to get him out and bit by bit is as good as all in one swallow. Anyway we went ahead on that basis and I hope you will agree it was wise.

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(3) Department of Justice reaction. The Department of Justice has been brushing off inquirers for years. They responded to your letter by saying they would review the whole case and they now want to talk to you. That may not be hopeful but it is at least less hopeless. The great obstacle for them and for us is of course this bird Kasper. Mary de Rachlewiltz, Pound's daughter, told me at Sermiento last month that she had seen him hanging around her father a couple of years ago and had warned Ezra that he was no good. Ez was flattered by him and told her not to get flustered. Turns out Mary was right. He has given the opposition, which hates Ezra for his anti-Semitism, just the handle they need. Brownell is a politician first last and all the time and he wont do anything impolitic. If we are to get anywhere we must get there in spite of Kasper. But we wont have Ezra's help. He hasn't replied to the letter I wrote him three months ago telling him what I thought of K..

(4) Family situation. Before I met Mary de Rachlewiltz I was pretty desperate. Dorothy Pound has apparently no influence and though she has a little money of her own she couldn't carry Ezra if he were let out and unloaded on her. But Mary is an intelligent woman and a good one and she wants to take her father over. If the indictment could be dropped and if Dulles could be persuaded to give him a passport (an unlikely eventuality given Dulles's mental and moral parts) Mary would take care of him and he could die in peace up there in that Merano country you know and love so well.

I think that covers the facts. If it doesn't wire me and I'll try to fill in.

Now about procedure. Frost is now back from England and is probably up in Vermont. At least I think he is back. I had written him, before I got your letter, asking him to reply to the Deputy Attorney General (Rogers) and say he was available for an interview. I told him I would be glad to go to Washington with him but that I wasn't a good bet to interview the Atty Genl not being a Republican—which is very important to the Atty Genl. I haven't heard from Frost but I make the following suggestion:

Why don't you write Frost (BUT SEND THE LETTER TO ME HERE) telling him your doctor thinks you had better not fly

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up to Washington just now but spelling out your feelings about the argument to be made: that Ezra has been in there for eleven years; that you understand the psychos say he can never be brought to trial; that his continued incarceration under those circumstances has already done us considerable damage abroad and may do us more—particularly if he should die in St. Elizabeths; that he is a very great poet and although that may not entitle him to special treatment it raises considerations which you as an American think should be kept in mind since one of the great pastimes abroad is nailing our asses to the barn door as bloody materialists who care nothing for art or artists (you might quote your remarks about Pound when you got the Nobel Prize—they were very impressive); that you are particularly concerned with the hook the U. S. and A. has got itself caught on in this affair but that you are also concerned for Pound and you believe that, if the indictment were nol prossed[,] it might well be possible to turn him over to his daughter at Merano who can and would take care of him.

Forgive me for seeming to suggest what you should say. You know I am not doing that but merely suggesting what I would say myself. You can do it far far better.

What I have in mind then is this: with your letter and one I will try to get from Eliot[,] Frost and I will go down to Washington and Frost will talk to Rogers or Healey[3] or whoever and will leave your letters with him and we will hope.

I can't see anything better to do. It would be wonderful to come down and talk it all out and prepare a statement or, better still, get hold of the legal attache at the Embassy. Maybe we should do that. But I know Frost couldn't make it just now and I know I shouldn't because I have been away for five months and I have got to catch up on myself. But thank you for wanting me to come. I wish I could not for Pound reasons but for my own.

Anyway think about it and let me know what more I can tell you and how you feel about this suggestion and anything else you want to say. We love Miss Mary and we send you our love

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and we are very much worried but will be quiet if you will tell us what happens and how things go and how you really feel[.]

yours Archie

1. Hemingway had written of health problems, the lingering effects of his airplane accidents in 1954, that would prevent him from participating in the approaching meeting with Rogers in Washington. 2. Winfred Overholser, M.D., director of St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D.C. 3. Harold H. Healy, Jr., executive assistant to Attorney General Brownell.

TO ROBERT FROST[1]

Dear Robert: 28 June [1957] [Conway]

Bless you. I won't forget the promise and I know you won't. I don't suppose we could tease you down here? Would you come if I drove up and got you?

About Ezra—I agree. And I don't feel too sure of my judgment but I can't bear to have him rot. That's about all I am wholly sure of.

I have asked Miss [Felicia] Geffen at the [American] Academy [of Arts and Letters] to write the Deputy Attorney General asking whether July 19 (late in the PM) or the 20th would do. Of course I would go along if you want me. I have also written Ernest asking him to send you a full statement of his views and I shall ask Tom to do the same so that you will go fully armed. Maybe it would be easier if their letters came to me so that I could turn the whole file over to you.

More when I know more. It was GOOD to see you in London.

yours aye Archie

1. The June 24 letter from Frost to which this letter replies appears in Lawrance Thompson, ed., *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York, 1964), p. 569.

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TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ezra: 16 March 1958 [Antigua]

I have at last (after how many months and years?) a firm and understandable statement from a responsible member of the present Administration who is also a good and responsible man. I would rather not name him at this juncture unless you very much want me to.[1]

In brief the position is this: a legal way can be found to release you to live as a kind of out-patient of some private sanitarium which means that you would be visited from time to time by a recognized physician, but would live in your own quarters like any body else and would have—I quote—"a maximum degree of freedom."

The Government is willing to make use of this legal way if your friends can find a suitable "inconspicuous place" within reach of the medical attentions described and can raise the necessary money if your own means won't suffice. The locus would have to be in the US.

But all this of course depends on your willingness to accept such an arrangement.

Will you think it over and let me have word as soon as you conveniently can? The above address will reach me until April fifth or so. Only air-mail reaches here. The rate is ten cents a half ounce.

I hope very much you will agree with me that this suggestion should be treated as confidential for the present. There are, as you know, plenty of people who would do their best by yammer and yelp to make any solution impossible and word gets around very fast where you are concerned. Some of your young friends seem to be wired for sound. I am always hearing things attributed to you which I am dead certain you never said and I suspect that they originate in the chorus.

Rereading the above, that word "quarters" seems to me unfortunate. Let me be specific about that. The idea is that you and, I assume, D. P. [Dorothy Pound], would live in a house of your own in some quiet town with the kind of climate you like where you could be visited from time to time by a recognized

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medic and where you would have "a maximum degree of freedom."

If you have any questions and will shoot them along to me I'll try to get them answered. I have told no one about this so far except J. Laughlin[2] who will have to go to work on the money end if you approve the project.

yours faithfully Archie

1. M refers to Christian A. Herter, whose letter to M dated March 5 had contained the information M herein relates. 2. James Laughlin, of New Directions.

TO EZRA POUND

This replies to yours of no date but post-marked March 25

Dear Ezra: 30 March 1958 [Antigua]

Anyway, thanks for supposing I mean well. First kind word I've had from you since I started butting my head against this stone wall two years ago.

I'll try to sort the questions out from the insults and answer the questions. God knows you have a right to all the answers anybody can give. Its your decision. If you say No, that's final and irrevocable. All the rest of us are trying to do is see whether there is a solution which the government and courts would accept and then to submit it to you. If you decide you don't want to accept it that's the end of it.

You describe the solution I described to you as "an illegal arrangement with an anonymity". I told you I would supply names if you wanted but that I hoped they would not be publicized for the time being as that would mean the end of the conversations. The official I have been talking to and writing to is Christian Herter, the Under Secretary of State, who is a friend of mine and in whose good faith I have complete trust. Herter has been in conversation with the Attorney General and with Dr. Overholser. Nothing about the proposed arrangement is "illegal" in any sense. If you decide to accept it it will have court approval. Any one who tells you it is "illegal" is either

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uninformed or incompetent.

You ask about your control of your earnings. No one has made any suggestion to the contrary. Your publishers will, as I understand it, propose to you an arrangement by which you would be guaranteed a definite *minimum* amount per month plus, of course, anything over that figure which your books might earn in a particular year. But this they will discuss with you directly. The purpose is to give you every possible cent of royalties plus a guaranteed minimum on which you could always count. In addition, if you will permit us to do so, some of us would like to raise funds to defray medical costs.

The question of the nature of these medical services you might wish to discuss with Dr. Overholser. You can be sure that what he has in mind is a physician, not a quack.

These seem to be the principal questions put in your letter. If you have more, please ask them. I'll be back in Conway, Mass., in two weeks and can be reached there. If I don't know the answers myself I'll try to get them.

And please let me say once more that the decision is, of course, wholly yours. If you are against it that's the end of it. I think myself that this is the best solution we can now hope for but what I think is of no importance. Its up to you. Let me know. A.

TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Dear Pappy: [*c.* 30 September 1958] Conway

George Plimpton, admirable character, handsome boss, has sent me his interview with you in the Paris Review.[1] Velly nice. But his quotation of A.MacL., which you kindly and correctly corrected[,] gave me a crise. Neither he nor anyone else ever heard me say "A writer should" let alone all the rest of that stuff of conscious and subconscious. What I remembered was the sailing glove and I told him about it one day to get him thinking about what he felt when he thought he was feeling. Nobody ever quotes anybody else correctly I suppose but the poor teacher doesn't have a chance because nobody even *hears*

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what he says.

Same thing probably applies to your remarks about Paris. George has you saying the only writers you knew were Joyce and Ezra and Stein. I won't believe you are ashamed of the poor relations until you tell me so yourself. Anyway I remember you. Never more clearly than now. Probably means I am getting to be an old, old whatdoyoucall *it* and the past is flooding in on me. But I can see you as clear as gin in a glass the first time I ever layed eyes on you. Not that I'm given to laying eyes but you know.

Important question is how you are. Last report you were down to one glass of wine a day and then off that. That was when we were twisting the Atty Gen's arm about EZ—must be almost a year ago. I hope you're back up to a quart of something—not Cuban—and, whatever you are drinking or not drinking, feeling better. I tried to discourage George from going down because I didn't think you'd feel much like being interviewed but he wrote me I was all wrong—you were feeling wonderful. Implication was that I'd do better to mind my own.

Someday we ought to catch up on the Ez business. It still has me puzzled. Last January I shifted from the Atty Gen to the State Department and talked to Chris Herter who agreed to intervene (which he did) but who told me that one thing was certain: Ez couldn't go back to Italy. So he did.[2] I think Frost gets a large part of the credit. The old boy despises Ez for personal reasons but once he got started nothing could stop him and I think Rogers finally gave up out of sheer exhaustion. I haven't seen Frost since. Will try to get his story this fall. Anyway, as you know, Ez hasn't changed none. If anything his letters more abusive than previous which was plenty.

Went to Dick Myers funeral[3] and sat between Gerald and Sarah [Murphy] whom haven't seen for maybe two years, Gerald having written me off. And for good reason. I didn't behave well. Numerous occasions, as you know, I haven't. Anyway I felt very sad and far off somehow sitting between them with no relationship anymore except of Sarah's warmth and generosity and thinking about the years when I knew Dick and everything off at the back of those years. The only friends you

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make really are the ones you make when you are young—or so, anyway, of my life—and you keep them but don't keep them. I mean they are always anyway your friends because they once were but only in memory. When you see them again you go back there where they were. Well—I sound old.

Funny year for me. I have a verse play [*J.B.*] being produced in New York—opening Washington in November—New York in December. Result Ada and I will be living in New York those months and I'll be commuting up here teaching one course which has come to seem pretty unreal with all that turmoil down at the Music Box theater. Probably ought to give up teaching but I love some things about it—the kids particularly—and it's a steady source of. But probably I ought to. At sixty-six with a new play boiling around in my head and a new life in the theater to learn I probably ought to stop. To hell with it—why do I bore you with all this. Getting sentimental and running on at the mouth—to quote a bird with a beard I used to know at Gstaad with a crossbow. Love to Mary. Ada and I talk about you both more than you'd guess. my love to you

Archie

1. The interview had appeared in *The Paris Review* No. 5 (Spring 1958), 60–89. 2. In Washington District Court, on 18 April 1958, the treason indictment against Pound had been dismissed by Judge Bolitha Laws, presiding judge in the 1945 hearing that had sent Pound to St. Elizabeths. On June 30 Pound had sailed for Italy. 3. Richard E. Myers, M's friend from Paris days, had died on August 8.

TO EZRA POUND

Dear Ezra: 17 August 1959 [Conway]

That letter warmed my heart. Of course, it doesn't wholly state the case because, as you know and I know, you don't really want answers to those questions: you want *your* answer. Since my answer means nothing to you, and since I can't accept your answer, there just hasn't seemed to me to be much point in continuing the discussion. But nevertheless and notwithstanding, this letter has made me very happy indeed because for the

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first time in a long time I can hear a human voice. Since it is the human voice of one of the men I most admire in our time, the event has significance.

The above isn't butter or rhetoric. I have been re-reading your translation of The Woman [*sic*] of Trachis for the 10th or 11th time, lost in admiration for the way in which you bring that usually inert play—that is, inert in the usual translation—to vivid life. Eva[1] has written me of the enormous and very real success you had in Berlin and of the depth of Mary's reaction to the performance. I have no difficulty in believing it. Your melange of dialects which sometimes bothers me on the printed page wouldn't bother on the stage for one moment—I am sure of that. You have, in addition to everything else, a formidable dramatic instinct.

I wish you would do two things for me. First, I wish you would give my love to Mary when you next see her. I met her only once but at a dark time for her, for you, and if I may say so, for me, but I shall never forget that evening. Second, I wish you would let me have two words about the practicality of your present situation and plans. Have you settled in Rapallo for good or will you go up to the mountains later? In general, how are things going? You will do me the credit to acknowledge that I haven't bothered you with questions of this kind before, but the fact is that I am, as I always have been, very much concerned. Archie

1. Eva Hesse had accompanied Pound and his daughter to the Berlin production of Pound's translation of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*.

TO JOHN DOS PASSOS

Dear Dos: 29 March [1968] Conway

What have we come to—writing on wrapping paper![1] But at least we're back from the Land of Aloha which is a good land to be back from, and in the mountain of old mail and Christmas cards was yours to remind us. How this life goes BY! Here I am going on for 76 and feeling not much different from the way

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I've always felt and yet the companions—where are they? Gerald and Ernest and Cummings and Scott and poor Sadie [Murphy] in a troubled dream and all the rest. You & we should somehow make our way to each other while there's someone left to find. The way I know I'm really old is the world—it's an old man's world to me—far worse than the one I knew forty years ago. (But what bothers me is that the young think so too: NO one loves *this* world.) Uxmal was a comfort. Time is so old there I felt somehow like a child—falsely like a child. Every now & then I read in the 42nd Parallel and savor the words. Love to you all—& to *you*, old friend[.] Archie

1. M's letter was written on a large brown sheet of personalized stationery, a Christmas gift from his friends Robert and Adèle Lovett.

From the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Wm. Donnelly.

John Dos Passos at Conway for the MacLeish's 25th wedding anniversary, 1941 (from the forthcoming book* Sara and Gerald *by Honoria Murphy Donnelly with Richard H. Billings, to be published by New York Times Books, November, 1982).

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Mark Halliday

Ballplayer At Midnight

On the third floor
I urinate into a white bowl
hearing cars on Taber Avenue
rolling busy through the dull cold night

Down the hall Julie must be falling
asleep in her green peeling room
she is used to being alone I tell myself

I wash hands gingerly because
my right little finger
got scraped in a basketball game yesterday

I think about me taking care of
my little finger my bony body
letting its bladder become free
and the people in those cars on Taber Avenue
staying on that cold road because
it's a straight road and not bumpy

I reach to pull a chain to turn off a light
letting those dumb electrons relax

and a black fly
huge with a green skull
and slow
as if bellyfull of black fly-liquor
all a-zigzag with the painful joy of collision

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roars
past my eyes—

I grab a section of newspaper and swing
and swing again wild thinking
of the fly touching my open eyeball
what if it did
what a dirtiness that would be

so I swing and
miss, swing, miss, the fly
roaring crazy around the orange bathroom
I pull the chain I duck out into the hall
the fat thing follows into the dull light

it is midnight here on the third floor
and Julie lies alone behind her door
and I think of how happy the fly must be
that my finger stings, the air is cold,
my body bony, people lost,
I swing, miss,
swing the dirty news at the grossblack fly

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Robert Phillips

The Land: A Love Letter

This hill and the old house on it
are all we have. Two acres,
more or less—half crabby lawn,
half field we mow but twice a year.

Some trees we planted, most gifts
of the land. The pine by the kitchen?
Grown twice as fast as our son. The bald
elm lost the race with my own hairline.

The mulberry—so lively with squirrels,
chipmunk chases and birds—
fell like a tower in the hurricane.
My chainsaw ate fruitwood for weeks.

And the juniper, the one that all but
obliterated the view? Men cut it down
to make way for the new well and water
pump. That pump should pump pure

gold: we lay awake, engineering
ways to get it paid for. But we'll never
leave this mortgaged hill: this land
is changing as we change—its face

erodes like ours—weather marks,
stretch marks, traumas of all sorts.
Last night another limb broke in the storm.
We still see it sketch the sky.

We've become where we have been.
This land is all we have, and this love
-letter is addressed to anyone
who ever loved and married the land.

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Wendy Salinger

The Eternal Boy

These were your sighs,
your toss,
the listing yoke
of your shoulders.

What spars,
blades, shafts,
rigging it took
to bear the weight of your journey.

Winds wore down the scoop
at the base of your throat.
The sun shed your sulk,
the mast of your frown.

It was bitter inside your mouth,
I remember,
and under the pelvic crescent
it was always night.

It's wrong to cast a shadow,
to deepen the sun
and then send it away—
but worse to love

the truth and to follow it
on an ocean that's blue,
that's green,
that's silver.

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John Morgan

The Inlet

Dozens of swans and geese
launched on its tar-black surface.
Sixteen tiny jellyfish
slosh against the breakwater:
all the vacations of
my life I didn't know how to use.

Behind me on the rise
my wife and child
move into sunlight,
disappear. And in the South China
Sea, all those thousands of
bodies going to the bottom . . . !

I am a way of looking
up out of a mask
encrusted with seaweed. One swan
chases another for fifteen,
twenty yards. A goose flaps and
flaps, filling her

wings with joy, but does not rise.

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David Lehman

Love and Destiny

And if the mortally wounded warrior revives, and if
his after-dinner pipe leads the drowsy sinner
to cast a long loving look at the cello in the corner
that has his initials on it; if I seem puzzled or uncertain
at the gates of neglected graveyards or Oxford colleges, and if
when I see you I fail to exclaim at the noose
of a necklace around your neck, sure sign of court intrigue;
if all your objections are overruled by the judge;
if the adulterer's hour comes and goes, and lady takes off her
clothes
and hangs them on a chair as if dressing the chair
and sees them, in a dream, transformed into bleating lambs
on the day of their slaughter; if the broken columns of
night
rise up, spring back to their full height and erect
a holy Greek temple out of the rubble; if graceful
poplars
dance like dominant flames in my desert mirage
as, suffering from *mal de mer* on *terra firma*, I continue
to grope my way toward the oasis of your pubic hair; if
time permits, if your slender arms do not prohibit;
I am willing; do not mistake my mirth for madness;
the sadness of senate debate has subsided at last
and from its serene state of servitude the sky, pale as ever,
has been released, along with dozens of doves from
eager schoolchildren's hands; they do not come in vain.

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Lying Presences

Norman Rush

Jack liked his office and it was all right to like your office. He would say that basically it worked. It was nicely enigmatic. All the tools of his trade, his papers and portfolios, were kept out of sight in a block of chrome-plated file cabinets with unlabelled drawers. He liked one thing on his desk at a time. The only way somebody uninitiated might guess he was an agent for illustrators of children's books was through the painting on the wall behind him of a pig in armor.

The walls were a naïve yellow. At eight floors up, he was the right distance from the sounds of the street. His window looked across onto the fluted blank raw cement wall of a telephone switching center, which in his opinion conveyed a faintly Romanesque feeling that was congruent. He might concede some disappointment in the way his custom desk had worked out. It was supposed to suggest an obsidian cube, but the joins in the black plastic slabs could be detected. The flooring, black rubber tile in a raised dot pattern, heavily underpadded, was a definite success. He bounced his heels on it a little before

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attending to finishing his lunch.

What he wanted to know was why you had to be some kind of expert to unwrap these little foilbound wedges of Gruyère without getting cheese under your fingernails. Skinning garlic cloves was a similar thing.

Business had been good in this office. Maybe the subtle playroom associations made clients regress. It was an idea. He was scraping rusk crumbs into his palm with an index card when he heard something in the outer office. Afraid, he listened.

It was his brother.

Perfect. Just what he needed at this point. He felt indescribable. *It was unfair.* Showing up unannounced when he was supposed to be living happily ever after on the other side of the country was vintage Roy. All Jack wanted to know was who was to blame. Helen was, for leaving the office door open when she went to lunch. She was going to suffer. Jack made himself smile at Roy, credibly he thought. He got up. He held his palms up, showing a good-natured surrender to fate. Roy came over and they shook hands. They said each other's names.

Roy was about the same as three years ago. As usual and like their father he had something on his mind, as his expression was making abundantly clear. Roy was acting bloody but unbowed. Actually, that was Roy's main facial expression. Except that it was interesting that Roy was afraid of something. Roy had lost weight, some. But he was the same grim proletarian persona as always, with his cheap Coast Guard surplus raincoat, short haircut, foreman clothes, no tie, shirt buttoned to the throat. Roy was taking off his raincoat. Jack considered giving Roy the proletarian a tip. In Roy's shirt pocket the tops of four ballpoint pens showed, and more than one pen showing was like a full-page ad for insecurity. But why should he tell Roy anything?

Roy went to look for a chair in the outer office. Everything about their grim father was coming back. It was okay to drink Benedictine because the Benedictines were okay, but no Chartreuse, ever, because there was something bad about the Carthusians. You were supposed to shun anyone who bought a

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Volkswagen, because of slave labor, and this was as late as the sixties. People who visited Spain before Casals went back were lepers. Their father had been a basement inventor. He had invented a dispenser cap, called Metercap, for toothpaste, that would measure out a generous average dose and thus cut down waste. The company that bought it suppressed the invention. Waste was the enemy of mankind. The company was criminal. Property was theft and so on into the night. Roy was against waste.

Roy was back, carrying a heavy pedestal chair that wasn't meant to be moved. He positioned it off the right corner of Jack's desk. He folded his raincoat scientifically into a pad and sat on it. Was the idea that sitting on it would somehow *press* it by body heat? Anything was possible.

Why was Roy here? Jack was trying to come up with a benign reason and getting nothing. Everything was settled between them, supposedly. Three years ago Roy had left for Phoenix taking his half of an inheritance that was not immense but not nothing, either. Roy had made his own bed, with a vengeance. Jack had argued the insanity of what Roy was doing, going out to be the executive secretary of some bizarre foundation having to do with flying saucer research. Roy was supposed to get perpetual room and board and subsistence, like an annuity, in exchange for his twenty-nine thousand. For a year newsletters from Roy's foundation had come, all of which Jack had returned unopened, marking them Of No Interest/Return To Sender in black block letters that left nothing to the imagination vis-à-vis his contempt for the whole thing. Now this. And typically Roy had no reaction whatever to the office.

Naturally it developed that what Roy wanted from him was amazing.

Jack recapitulated, working to keep his tone unmocking. "Now see if I have this straight. What you say is I'm supposed to take you into the house, you live with us, for two or three months. And I do it without asking you why or getting any reason for it from you that I can give to Judith. We just take you in, like that. On my say so to Judith, just like that."

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"That's what I'm asking." Roy was never apologetic. Probably that was admirable.

Jack said, "And just *nothing*, no personal history for my benefit on this? Whether you're in trouble or on the run or something like that? Well, look. A few years ago you did something I took exception to, would be putting it mildly. Now here you are. I mean, Roy, *there was money involved* if you recall. And what I pick up in all this is I'm out of line if I even speculate about what's happened. I take it the money is gone, somehow?"

Roy was a baritone. "Jack, I told you. I'm not asking for money. I need, and all I need, and for about two months maximum, is housing with you and Judy. I just need that. I don't plan to eat meals with you. What I wish is you'd accept it when I tell you I'm doing you a favor not telling you any details on this. And *please*, there is no legal angle on this! I guarantee if you just do this for me, just do it and don't question me, there's no disadvantage. Really."

"But Roy, why do I get the feeling...how can I put this...you're *doing me a favor* even asking me to do this for you, to put myself out, which is what it is? Why do I feel that?"

A silence resulted.

Jack said, "I don't think you grasp the position you put me in. Suppose we say this, though. First of all, you're my brother. Now suppose I say okay, you can stay with us, just so you give me *some* explanation of what's going on. Is that a lot to ask? I mean, considering I'm the one who has to carry this off with Judith? By the way, she wants to be called Judith instead of Judy. It's important. Professional thing."

Roy, still unreadable, said, "It sounds like what you're saying is to make something up."

"Roy, *hey*, don't do this. I'm telling you something that isn't so complicated. I need some explanation. I need something I can give Judith. If you knew anything about our relationship you'd know that at this point I can't just ask her to do something on faith or because she's my wife."

Roy looked thoughtful. "If I tell you something fairly fan-

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tastic, I wonder if you'll make a judgment on it?''

''I'm trying to get through to you the position I'm in. It would really be smarter of you not to try and put me in a box. By the way, what about your bags? You must have more than that flight bag.''

''In a locker at the station.''

Roy rose, still thinking. Jack looked at his watch.

''Okay,'' Roy said.

Jack was unsure what that meant.

''I'll be back,'' Roy said.

''Could you make it around four, since I have to see a couple of people this afternoon? Four-thirty would be even better.''

Roy nodded and left.

Jack was brilliantly spending the afternoon obsessing on causes. He knew it was pointless. It went back to their father and the feeling of being put down if you weren't sacrificing yourself for some reform or at the very least living on the exact amount of money and food it actually required to sustain you so that if you were doing nothing else in life you were avoiding waste. When he thought of the trial and anguish it had taken him just to get minimally free of that, it was pathetic. And, of course, no one ever raised the question of how much time anybody should devote to a cause aimed against a thing doomed to come to a natural end on its own whether you spent your life going to meetings over it or not. For example surely just the ratios of reproduction between eighteen million blacks and four million whites meant you could perfectly safely let apartheid lapse its way out of existence. Or people who belonged to the English Speaking Union, speaking of wasting your life promoting a sure thing. Who ever raised the question of how many people were actually doing cause work just for the opportunity it offers to display how much contempt they have for people who have to work for money, or actually want to work for money? Also why did Roy's flying saucer movement, if that was the right word for it, qualify as any kind of cause? So what if space civilizations were sending spaceships down. People seemed to accept flying saucers anyway, as a kind of strange fact of life, so what was the point in organizing around it?

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Roy's luggage was going to be humiliating. It was almost a sufficient reason in itself for sending Helen home early. It was impossible. How would he get Judith to be unsarcastic about Roy's ongoing one-man war on waste? Clothes would be an issue. If you spent money on clothes for anything with a little style you were decadent. I.e. you could find perfectly good secondhand clothes if you knew where to look. You could buy surplus or factory seconds or best of all make your own out of sacking. Probably Roy would show up with luggage that was somehow *handmade*. You should be examined for not buying day-old bread. Everyone should buy *dented cans*. Also there was a correct way to do all these things, which was just to do them and not be perceived as spending a lot of mental time on avoiding being duped. Water was the only thing to drink. Also it was free. The point of Roy's carrying around a change purse full of nuts and raisins was to avoid being duped into going into restaurants on impulse and wasting money, or if you did, you popped down some nuts and you'd order less. And by the way it was desirable to randomly skip meals because in the state of nature wasn't it obvious nobody was eating three meals a day? If you kept your belly full you were suppressing certain survival mechanisms, as he recalled it. Salt was a better dentifrice than toothpaste. Or was that their father? But then why invent a toothpaste cap? Salt had to be Roy.

Jack did some deep-breathing exercises to calm down. Of course Roy would never say anything about salt. You'd just have him wandering around the kitchen in the morning with a toothbrush, saying could he trouble you for some salt? And the salt would be in plain sight.

Jack heard the outer door open and close and bags being dropped. It was late enough that he could have assumed Roy wasn't coming. He could have gotten out ten minutes earlier, locking up and going. Roy was sensitive and might have decided to go away for good. Roy came in, rolling the pedestal chair on its base-rim this time. Suppose they'd met in the elevator? This was better. He was prepared.

He was not going to be intimidated. Or made to do something that was anything but in his interest and Judith's. That

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was his stance, period. Things cost money. He had the right to remind himself that things cost money, and, for example, nobody was going to chip in to pay Helen for the afternoon off Roy's arrival had forced him to give her.

It was getting dark out. The not altogether satisfactory ceiling lights were on. The office wasn't engineered for night work. He was not somebody who needed to work late. He thought of their mother standing at the head of the basement steps moaning down at their father to come to bed.

It was on Roy to begin.

Roy sat down, but was uncomfortable. He got up and went to lean against the wall beside the door, his hands in his pockets, his gaze directed upward at the wall behind Jack. Jack hoped Roy would curb his tendency to talk prolish—like a proletarian, Jack's private term for it—a tendency that manifested when Roy was discussing some subject he considered significant.

"Okay I'll just start this the best I can.

"Something I never told anybody is important.

"You're too young to remember when Niles died. He was my favorite of all the uncles, somebody I really loved. Anyway, at the cemetery I was really upset and when they started lowering the coffin I just couldn't handle it. I walked away. Ran away down a path, just trying to get out of sight of what was happening. I was nine, about.

"I didn't go very far, not more than five minutes away through some trees and out to a place that overlooked a creek and two small hills with a gap between them. This was bright ten or eleven o'clock in the morning with absolutely clear skies.

"So I'm standing there all in turmoil when up in the sky I see something absolutely terrifying. It just floated across between the two hills. I'm telling you I can still feel the fear, just talking about it. What I saw was a metal thing that was painted, or rather colored, black. What it looked most like was a clamshell or an open umbrella without the handle and made out of metal: you could see the rivets down along the ribs. It was about the size of a car. I saw it I'd say for about three full minutes. It was absolutely silent. I was terrified. The thing was

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real. I felt the thing had some ominous connection with Niles being dead. I saw every detail. It had no windows. I closed my eyes to see if it would still be there when I opened them. I looked at it with one eye closed. Looked at it through my fingers. It was real. I knew it was evil. My state of terror was just something inexpressible. Anyway, I got out of there, ran the hell back. That was all. I made myself forget about it. This was 1942. Of course I never told anybody. You know the atmosphere in the family. When I thought about it later, I mean as an adult, I wondered if there was some story or fairy tale or something about a box or device that comes to collect souls that maybe I knew of. But there was nothing I could associate it with. And the thing was real. Physical."

Roy closed his eyes briefly.

"So just let that incident stay in the background for a while."

Jack said, "This hallucination."

"Right. Just what I assumed it was myself, when I got older. Let it be in the background.

"Now as to me and the Society. I'm out of it. Actually, I was expelled. The money's gone.

"What happened is simple. I won't bore you with all the stages and vicissitudes, but what happened is I reached a conclusion about flying saucers that nobody in the Society could deal with, about what they really are.

"One thing led to another and my position got untenable." Roy shrugged.

Jack wondered when Roy's yes-yeah copula was going to show up. Yes was what Roy felt comfortable saying, but yeah was what he thought he really ought to be saying, being a man of the people. So he would say yes (yeah), with a slight diminuendo on the yeah. Stress would do it. Jack wondered whether the fact that nobody really changes was encouraging or tragic.

Roy was ready to go on. "First you have to know the Society's line, which used to be my line, no question, which is that saucers are real and they're extraterrestrial. The term for it is ETH, extraterrestrial hypothesis, in case you care. The Society is the Vatican of ETHism. Anyway, the saucers are pieces of ad-

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vanced technology from some other planetary system, you can prove their existence by radar returns and so on and there's other physical evidence we won't go into, blah blah blah. So okay."

Roy tucked his shirt in more neatly all around. "But here and there a few people began to wonder. For instance, you start studying the close encounter cases where witnesses report occupants in and around a landed saucer. It makes no sense. You never get two encounters with beings who look like they come from the same planet. Your occupant reports run all the way from giants to midgets, no eyes, no mouths, Greek god types, robots, spacesuits, tunics, cat eyes, triangular faces, no ears, pointed ears, flippers instead of hands, webbed hands, you name it. Now take a look at craft descriptions. Another circus! Large, small, transparent, globular, cigar-shaped, mother ships, baby ships, cylindrical, lenticular, they divide in two, they turn into clouds. . . and on and on and on.

"So the ETHists have a slight problem. You have to start rejecting reports that don't fit. You have to start calling certain people liars while other people whose stories are just as good are not liars.

"Now take a look at something else interesting: the phenomenon appears to be getting more vigorous and exotic over time. Saucer sightings started out as primarily visual arm's length kinds of things. Then you start getting some fairly trivial side effects like broken tree branches and holes in the ground. Then it turns out the saucers can blank out electrical systems in cars. Then in about the sixties you start getting abduction reports, usually with some gruesome physical examination by the aliens thrown in. Or there may be some suggestion the aliens are into collecting sperm or ova or something similarly menacing. They induce amnesia and it sometimes takes hypnosis to even get at what happened. Then beginning in the seventies you get farmers finding their cattle mutilated, dead, all their blood drained out and various body parts excised by laser, it looks like. And the cattle are lying in fields with no tracks on the ground. And people are reporting seeing lights in the sky. So what is *this* all about?"

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Jack said, knowing it was the wrong thing to say, "The first thing I'd do if I decided to go into this would be invest in a good lie detector."

"Jack, let's try and proceed straight through this. One problem is, you don't know the literature. I guess what I'm saying is take my word for it that once you screen out all the liars you still have something vast going on. For the sake of argument can we assume some real things are happening to people who are for the most part reporting them in good faith, or not? I mean, I'm a case in point. I had an experience of a real thing and I can swear to God to you it was absolutely real, real in the same exact sense as brushing your teeth."

"Be my guest," Jack said.

Roy began walking back and forth.

"Okay, just about this point an historical element comes into it. Somebody going through old newspapers finds something interesting. It seems in the eighteen-nineties there was a wave of sightings of things called mystery airships. These were weird items, aerodynamically impossible naturally, with vanes and propellers and sometimes even paddle wheels. They were reported coast to coast in the U.S. Then slightly later, in England, a similar thing, except these were cigar-shaped. There was a threat element, too. There were some petty disappearances of animals. And there was the suggestion that these things were going to drop explosives in some connection. Then the whole thing stops. The airships did the usual meaningless repertory, mainly startling people with beams of blinding light.

"*What is going on here?* And of course the Society has to take the position that all these old reports must have been a newspaper hoax, blah blah blah.

"What I was coming around to, or being *driven* around to, was an idea some other people were getting. The idea is that the whole flying saucer phenomenon is basically part of the spectrum of other psychic phenomena. That is, a flying saucer behaves more like a ghost in almost every respect than it does like a piece of machinery. It belongs right in there with apparitions, materializations, poltergeists. The difference is in

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magnitude only. Period.

"Now it's important to understand I'm not claiming any originality about this part of it. This struck me about the same time it struck other people and it's an actual school by now, this part of it. But I do go beyond it. I do go beyond it. And I'm the only one."

Roy sat down again.

"Anytime you want my reaction, say the word," Jack said.

"Not quite yet.

"So.

"So I was keeping pretty much undercover with this at the Society. It amounted to a conversion and I had to consider how hard I was going to fight for it, when to come out with it, all that sort of petty thing, when I figured out the next part of it."

Jack reminded himself to be patient, be wary.

"The Society rents computer time," Roy said. "One thing they do is keep building the data base. There is an immense amount of stuff to work with, all kinds of data.

"I was looking at the distribution of sightings by hour of the night (almost all of them are at night), by month, and by location. There's a wave pattern which is pretty marked and suddenly I knew what it was. Or rather. . . I got a theory of the answer to what it was. I was looking at these patterns and what I was seeing was a *feeding pattern*.

"I was looking at predation curves, which I know something about. Think about it."

"I don't think I'm following. You mean the flying saucers are out trying to *eat* people. . . ? I'm not following, Roy."

"Okay, take a step back. First let's say we provisionally assimilate flying saucers to other psychic phenomena. Okay then. Now.

"What would you say is the single most salient common feature of psychic events, broadly speaking?

"Let me tell you. The single most important common feature of psychic phenomena is their absolute pointlessness. Psychic research is the study of pointless events. You can see what I mean. Hauntings and apparitions are pointless, the

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Loch Ness monster is pointless, the abominable snowman, poltergeists are supremely pointless. Strange and fearful events that never, ever, lead anywhere or cumulate in anything. Of course, you have your inescapable specialists who specialize in manufacturing explanations of what these strange things purport. The Society is one. Or some fraud of a psychic sits down in a haunted house and comes up with some song and dance about an earthbound spirit. Exorcists. And so on.

"Wait, before you object let me lay out the whole thing so you can object to the whole thing. A strange thing happens. I started asking myself why are all these manifestations so pointless? Of course a lot of things you never get an explanation for, not even a lying one. In England in the eighteenth century there was a character called Springheel Jack, who was a figure that knocked on your door, had some kind of lantern box on his chest, made a terrifying face and then shot up into the air and disappeared. This happened all over London. What was the point? Take something else: animal reports—escaped lions and tigers reported seen roaming around in the suburbs someplace. You see it in the papers periodically. People see them but the local circus zoo says no animals are missing. They never catch them. Of course, you can fall back on everybody being a liar if you want. But take just the one case from my own life. It happened. Would you say I'm a liar?"

"No, the reverse," Jack said.

"The Loch Ness monster is a good example. Bigfoot: some terrifying yells in your backyard and chickens with their heads torn off and maybe some dung. The Black Dogs of Kent. Poltergeists. Light bulbs explode, fires start, scissors follow you around . . . what for?

"Okay, so there's no point in terms of purpose. But there is something else. What's *produced* in all these displays? Ask yourself that question and you get one answer. The product is fear. The product is extreme human fear, mostly fear to the exquisite point of fear of death, or capture, or alteration, or injury, or abduction, what have you. Big, rich blooms of fear. And when do these strange events tend to take place? *Almost always* when people are by themselves, alone, unsupported by

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other people, in lonely places, often or mostly at night. I can show you a graph of UFO sightings and the number involving more than one person is too low, not normal.

"So you can see what this turns into is a general theory of apparitions, of which the saucer part is just one branch."

Their father would be in ecstasy. Here was Roy the champion of an idea so hopeless of adoption that everyone is supposed to marvel. Yet how could you not devote your life to it? If you did and no one believed you and then you died and were proved right, so much the better. Genius!

Roy continued. "The short of it is that there's something...I'm willing to call it a life-form, a population...a thing that, one, targets on individual vulnerable people ...two, somehow activates some negative belief pattern of the individual...three, converts that into a somehow material quick display. Then it eats the fear.

"Now I know there are a lot of somehows in there but I'm giving this to you very quick and rough. I have ideas about all the mechanisms involved. Don't say anything yet.

"Just a couple of things I need to add. The thing is ancient and vast and permanent and basically evil. Also, it *adapts*! It has to. You could even develop some sympathy for it if you let yourself. It has two serious enemies, scientific progress and stupid human optimism. Show you what I mean.

"It relies on people having a stock of things to be afraid of. You can see it easily in the case of ghosts. In order for a ghost to appear there has to be a prior notion that a ghost is likely to be attached to a certain place or a certain kind of place. But science marches on and fewer and fewer people are disposed to believe in ghosts. The threshold gets higher. Everything is squeezing the thing, really, if you look at it. Secularization, science, urbanization pushing people into mutual supportive crowds, streetlighting. And another thing. As a species we seem determined to give the most optimistic interpretation to a thing that we can. You no sooner get spiritualism off to a roaring start with the dead coming back being nasty and vengeful than people start churchifying the movement into modern spiritualism with its happy summerland view of death. The optimists

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are already at work on the saucers, saying Oh they're only here to make us respect nature and they're going to give us some damned wisdom scroll pretty soon or a cure for cancer: don't be afraid. Poor entities. It's hard. Did you see *Close Encounters*? The saucer people live in a giant thing like a wedding cake and they are so gentle. . . .

"Look, the whole psychic plenum is lies! *Lying presences command it*. The saucers have nothing to do with space, lake monsters have nothing to do with plesiosaurs, ghosts have nothing to do with the dead. I'm getting excited."

Roy stopped. Again Jack had the sense that Roy was afraid. What could be done with that?

Roy briefly pressed his knuckles into the crown of his head, a headache treatment.

Roy resumed before Jack felt fully ready.

"Now we need to focus on the saucers. Maybe as I was saying we should have a certain amount of sympathy for the phenomenon. It gets hungry. And here we have the situation of the host population getting harder and harder to terrify. Think how easy it must have been to go out and feed in pagan times, for example, when everybody was doing human sacrifices. Pens full of people knowing they were going to be put to death, a whole spectrum of fears, animism, every tree or rock with some guardian entity associated with it you had to be careful not to offend. You might not even need to manifest at all.

"Okay. Then come the more refined religions, but you still have an evil adversary element in the religion that people really believe in. So you can still operate. Then religion moderates even further and the evil forces get to be merely symbolic. The whole backdrop of folklore about witches and vampires and ghosts gets removed by science and the new sanitized religions. You can imagine the thing getting desperate. What it needs is some kind of fear coming out of technology and science itself, since they're not going to go away. Themselves, I meant to say.

"It's interesting. Did you ever hear about the ghost rockets they had in Sweden in the late thirties, just before the war? A

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whole wave of reports of frightening huge rockets going over and never hitting anything. Clearly an abortive try.

"Okay, I'm giving you too much detail.

"So the thing needs something coming out of science itself, something that's going to be a plausible occasion for fear it can manipulate. So of course this is what we get. How it starts is beside the point, in a way. It starts. Flying discs from somewhere seen in the sky. It gets on the radio. We're being visited by craft from other planets. They have an awesome technology. They threaten our aircraft (famous early case on this, the Mantell case). They're invulnerable to our technology and their intentions are unknown. They become terrifying.

"Everything is working! The thing gets quickly associated with disappearances like the Mantell case or those six seaplanes that disappeared off Florida, right or wrong. They pick you up and do things to you that you can't remember. They make electrical systems fail. What's more terrifying than something that makes your *car* not work, for an American? Nothing. It multiplies: lonely roads, night, isolated people. . .

Jack wanted to change the subject. He knew he was being irrational. There was too much green in the wall color, at least by artificial light. The situation was bad, too theatrical because of the silence of the empty building, which was becoming intrusive. Roy was talking.

". . . and the structure of the thing is fascinating. You have your garden variety type-one encounters which means close approaches of lights that scare you but that may not even come that close. Just some anomalous light is all it takes to get a fear-rush going. Then you have a scale of manifestations all the way up to full-dress abductions, time-loss, where you get your genitals toyed with and needles inserted. There's a parsimony in the way the thing works that's really admirable. The big events keep the fear game going. The little lights cruise around and do okay during the interims, although all the entrepreneurial propaganda about our friends the space brothers is unhelpful. Fear is the key.

"The thing of actual physical effects is fascinating. I mean, they can do it, no question about it. But you have to remember

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that the pattern of token physical effects going along with psychic events is absolutely traditional. Take poltergeists: okay, they can start fires and displace crockery in your house. The pattern of injury to small animals that you have with bigfoot and these other swamp fakes, I don't know how that works. Maybe the thing initially capitalizes on regular kinds of predation and just manifests in the vicinity. Then it develops the means to duplicate the effect. But once the circuit is formed with a really strong fear template, they really are able to have physical effects, aside from just the visual. What the limit is I don't know.

"Now just one other sinister thing. The number of reports from couples and groups larger than three is going up. Which suggests the thing is getting stronger and learning to tap groups. Has to be looked at more but it seems to be definite.

"This is like giving birth, doing this. I feel better."

Jack could wait. It was crucial to make Roy wait. After all, whether he knew it or not what Roy had was the theory of what's wrong with everything in the world. What vistas etcetera of peace and harmony would be opened up if only this force could be slain or confined and so on. Genius! Jack hated to be in the building after business hours. It was a deep thing with him. This had to be finished.

Jack had to trust himself. He began blindly, not knowing what he was going to say.

"You're saying we're slaves or something."

It got Roy immediately. "No, man, you don't listen! *Don't improve on me!*"

Jack pressed on. "Also, and tell me if this is wrong, you and you alone are the one human being who's figured this vast thing out."

"Probably I'm not. I'm the only one I know, is all. Look. It's a hypothesis. Look, nobody can figure out what Gurdjieff meant when he said we were food for the moon, maybe he knew something. Anyway, it isn't important."

"On the contrary," Jack said. A point occurred to him. He knew it was petty. "Also, Roy, what about children? You'd

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think children would naturally be the ones involved in these experiences all the time, because of being credulous. . . ."

"They are, a lot," Roy said. "But it's interesting they aren't more. One answer is that you get kids less and less disciplined via the bogeyman and fear-objects than they used to be. Also, and this is just guessing, but I think they're probably not ripe yet: what you'd want, I would guess, is the fear product of a mature nervous system, not the little squib you might get from a child."

Jack could project a demand for money materializing out of this. He had to focus.

The phone on his desk began to ring. He indicated to Roy that it was to be ignored. This was good. He concentrated. He needed to consolidate.

Jack said, "So, obviously, with these views you become persona non grata around the Society. That figures.

"Anyway, we can summarize. What you're saying is there's this widespread invisible force or parasite that lives on human fear. It preys mainly on isolated individuals but now you say couples. And it changes as the culture changes. It works by energizing certain mental patterns of belief and turning them into real scenes of varying degrees of materiality, depending. The saucer phase is part of a thing stretching back into the past as far as werewolves. The population of this enemy, it looks like, is growing. Or maybe keeping pace with human population. Is that fair?"

Roy looked unhappy. "Yes (yeah). Keeping in mind that what I'm giving you is the Olive Pell Bible, so to speak. There's so much detail on each step that I'm not giving. . ."

"I'm curious about what ever happened to boring from within, Roy. Why you couldn't just keep your head down and slowly. . ."

"That's what I thought I was doing. Somebody talked."

"So now the reason you need to stay with somebody is. . . say it again?"

Roy was tiring. "I don't know. I really need to. Not for long. I need to be around people. It would be short term."

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"I think you're being evasive. You think you're in danger, possibly, am I right? Don't want to be alone? Come on."

He had Roy really wary now. An approach was coming to him.

"And about this thing getting stronger," Jack said. "Something about that interests me. Say more about that."

"I can't say much except that it is. I'm not competent. It may be the difference between being able to exploit just individual biological electromagnetic fields, which are relatively weak, and modern artificial ones, which are incredibly strong. Or that could be all wrong."

"Can I ask you what's the macro side of this thing as you see it? You must've thought about it, such as, what about wars? I mean, you'd think the thing would flourish during wars with so many people in fear of death over whole areas. So is the thing, say, implicated in wars, possibly?"

Jack felt safe. He knew what to do.

"I don't speculate about it," Roy said.

"But why not? Would you say the incidence goes up in the periods between wars, offhand?"

"All I know is it does go up between wars. But there could be all kinds of reasons for that. I don't speculate about it."

"*And the thing is getting stronger.*"

"I already said that. Yes (yeah)."

Roy's voice was up in the top of his throat. He looked damp.

Now Jack could do it. There was enough. It was only a question of which accusations to use. Roy could be part of the thing, spreading it. Or attracting it. It was a position. He had to drive Roy out, this time for good. In no way was he going to subject Judith to this. He had obligations. Everything was involved. He had figured things out. You struggled to escape a stupid artisan mentality and you did and here was your brother, a pauper but somehow so interesting. Never. It was not going to happen.

He would use rage.

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Portfolio

Graphics

William T. Wiley

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The Glittering Remains

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Erie Cafe

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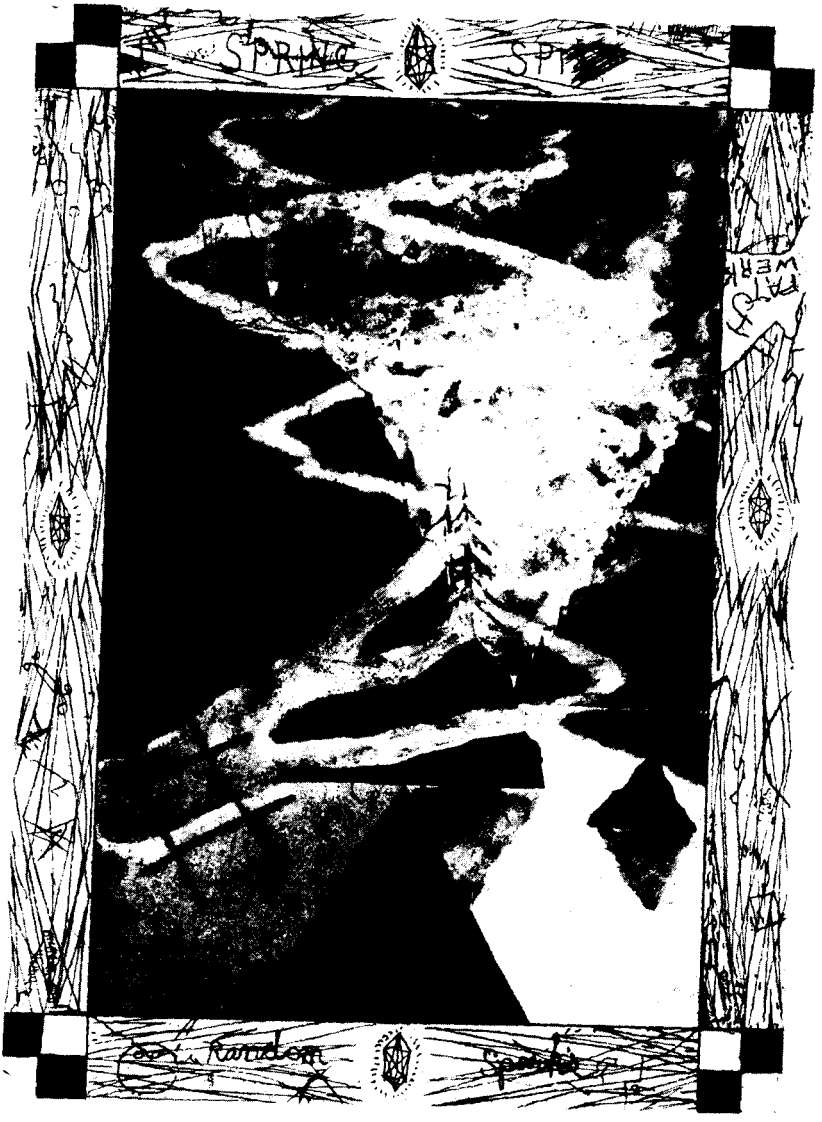

Spring Spits

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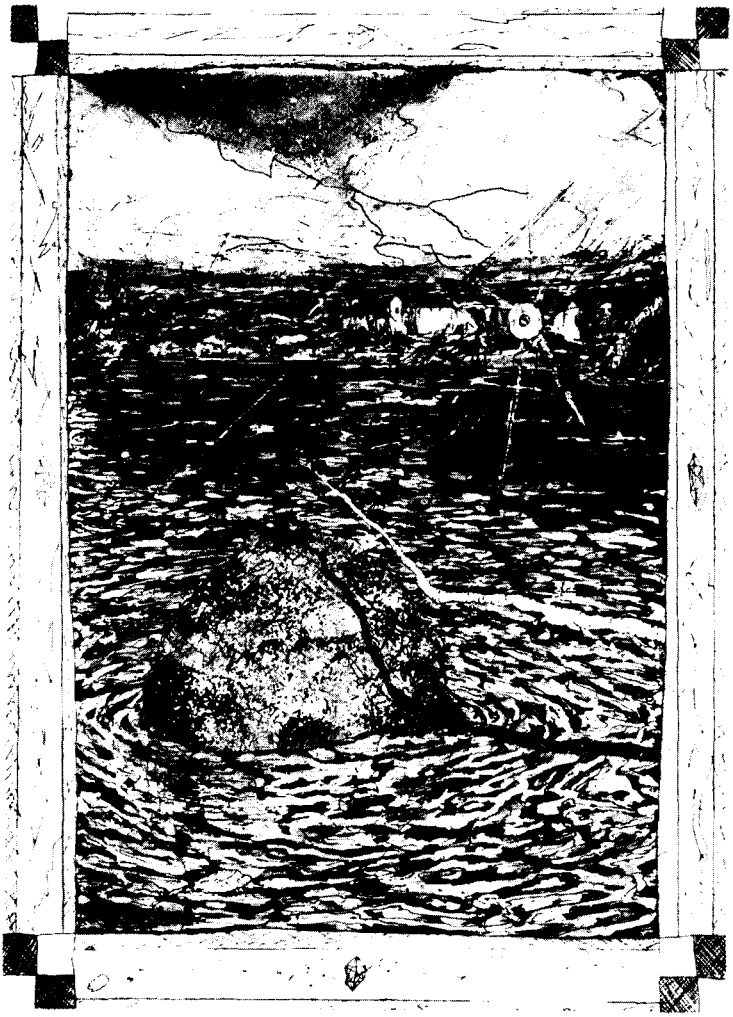

Beginning Passes

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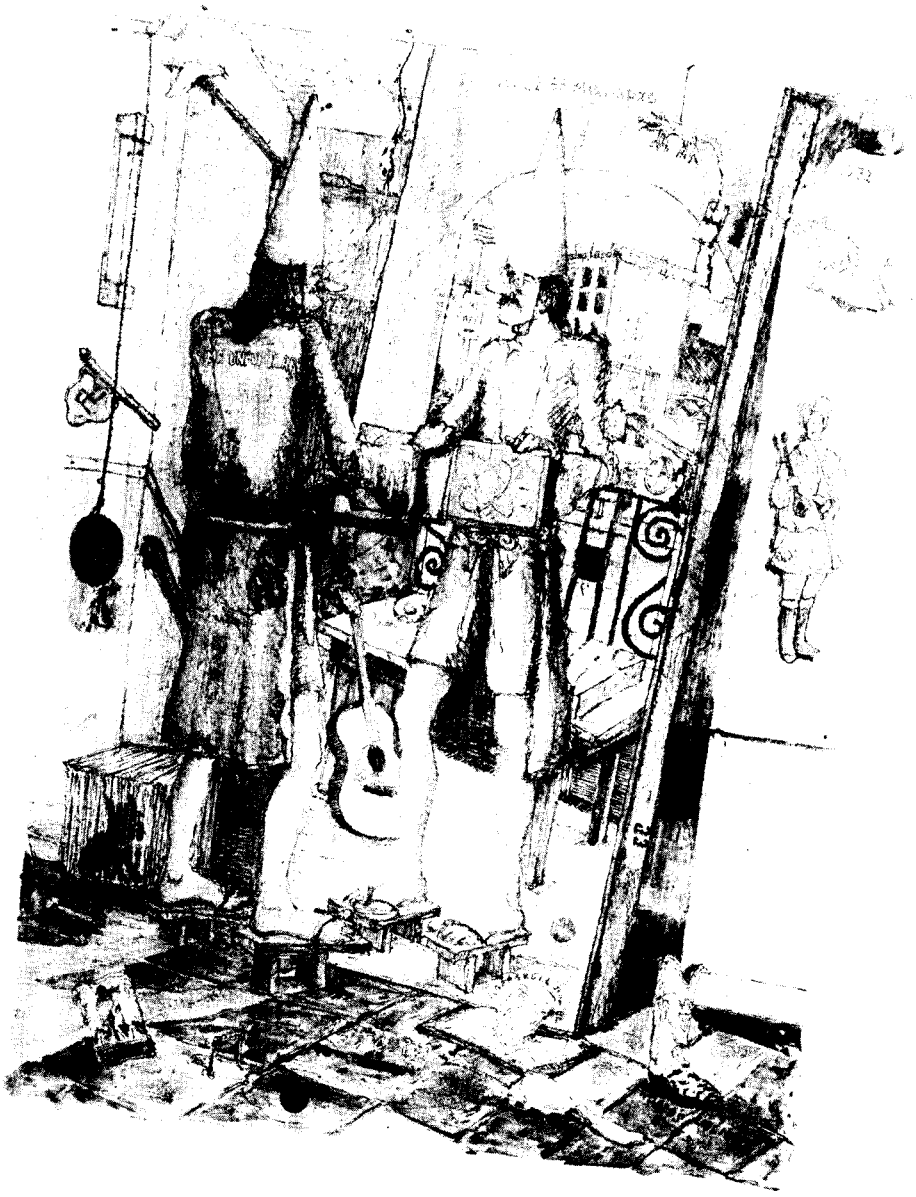

Mr. Unpopular

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Spooky on the Line

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Two Poems by Stephen Sandy

Tom and Henry, Camping Out

Well, Ford, people like us, we
Don't have to worry. We have the river
Coming up just here. Dancing came

Naturally, easy as misprints in a bunch
Of kids setting their own type. We had
Palazzo font, and the right note

Of melancholy. To find purple gauze
Or gold faience on morning coffee means
The whole day will go by like a nap.

We had the cherry flowering above us
Where we lounged like arrived mallards
The voluble petals billowing

Around us whispering, "How far is down?"
We had a candle ready and watched the lightning
Shred up from the landing field in the valley

When the transformer went. You laughed,
"Never explain." We knew if we could step out
Of our bodies they would fill up with those garnets.

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Bridge of Abandonment

The door was painted on the wall

In your room you worked
The filing cabinet
Mining the load
Of memorabilia

Your Death, dressed like the good Gray Poet
Still leaned over your shoulder
Biting your neck
Leaving a brown-out hickey, token
Of ashen skylines
The seven bridges of a sexy life
Black moon blazoning a white shield

Still somewhere up the heart
There'd be another year for crooning
In spite of zeroes of monoxide

Clear water in cold light
Treading old rocks that make
Strong water hardly ripple
Brim or curl

Made a thing to wonder at

Black door, white wall.

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Two Poems by George Bradley

The Sound of the Sun

It makes one all right, though you hadn't thought of it,
A sound like the sound of the sky on fire, like Armageddon,
Whistling and crackling, the explosions of sunlight booming
As the huge mass of gas rages into the emptiness around it.
It isn't a sound you are often aware of, though the light speeds
To us in seconds, each dawn leaping easily across a chasm
Of space that swallows the sound of that sphere, but
If you listen closely some morning, when the sun swells
Over the horizon and the world is still and still asleep,
You might hear it, a faint noise so far inside your mind
That it must come from somewhere, from light rushing to darkness,
Energy burning towards entropy, towards a peaceful solution,
Burning brilliantly, spontaneously, in the middle of nowhere,
And you, too, must make a sound that is somewhat like it,
Though that, of course, you have no way of hearing at all.

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In Suspense

at the Verrazano Narrows Bridge

The composition of many particulars
Held the broad promise of our beginning
And so we set out calmly into the sky,
Out over sheer space and distant waters
Where other travellers had found harbor;
It was the gothic grandeur, the bright towers,
By which we knew the magnitude of our attempt,
Rushing forward into the expanding light.
The structure of our adventure, the road
We went by, protected us from the view
Beneath us, and it was the monumental
Objects, distant caricatures of themselves,
Which tried to occupy our attention.
Having come so far, we reached the summit:
A surprise, we hadn't been paying attention
To much besides a perception of ourselves
As puny and audacious, caught in a monumental
Undertaking; but now the panoramic view
Of our accomplishment, the end of the road,
Presented itself in the soft, reflected light.
We felt, of course, elevated in our attempt,
Inspired by the reach of that last aspiring tower,
Felt fulfilled in the wish each of us harbors
To journey and return safely off the waters;
And so we were set down out of the sky
According to the prescriptions of our beginning
Into a difficult place, though we weren't particular.

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Two Poems by Charles Simic

The Childhood of Parmenides

For asking, why is there something
Rather than nothing?
The schoolmaster sends the little punk
To see the Principal.

Unfortunately, they haven't got one yet.
There's only King Minos and his labyrinth,
And of course, Philemon, who's about to die
laughing
At the sight of an ass eating figs.

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Cold Blue Tinge

The pink-cheeked Jesus
Thumb-tacked above
The cold gas stove,
And the kid sitting on the pisspot,
Blowing soap-bubbles
For the black kitten.

Very peaceful, except,
There's a faint moan
From the next room.
His mother's asking
For her medicine.
There's no answer.
The bubbles make no noise,
And the kitten's sleepy.

All his brothers and sisters
Have been drowned.
He'll have a long life, though,
Catching mice for the baker,
And then the undertaker.

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Lisel Mueller

Monet Refuses The Operation

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you

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the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that I despair, my brush not being
long, streaming hair. To paint
the speed of light! Doctor,
our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our clothes, skin, bones
to gases. If only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim the world, blue vapor without end.

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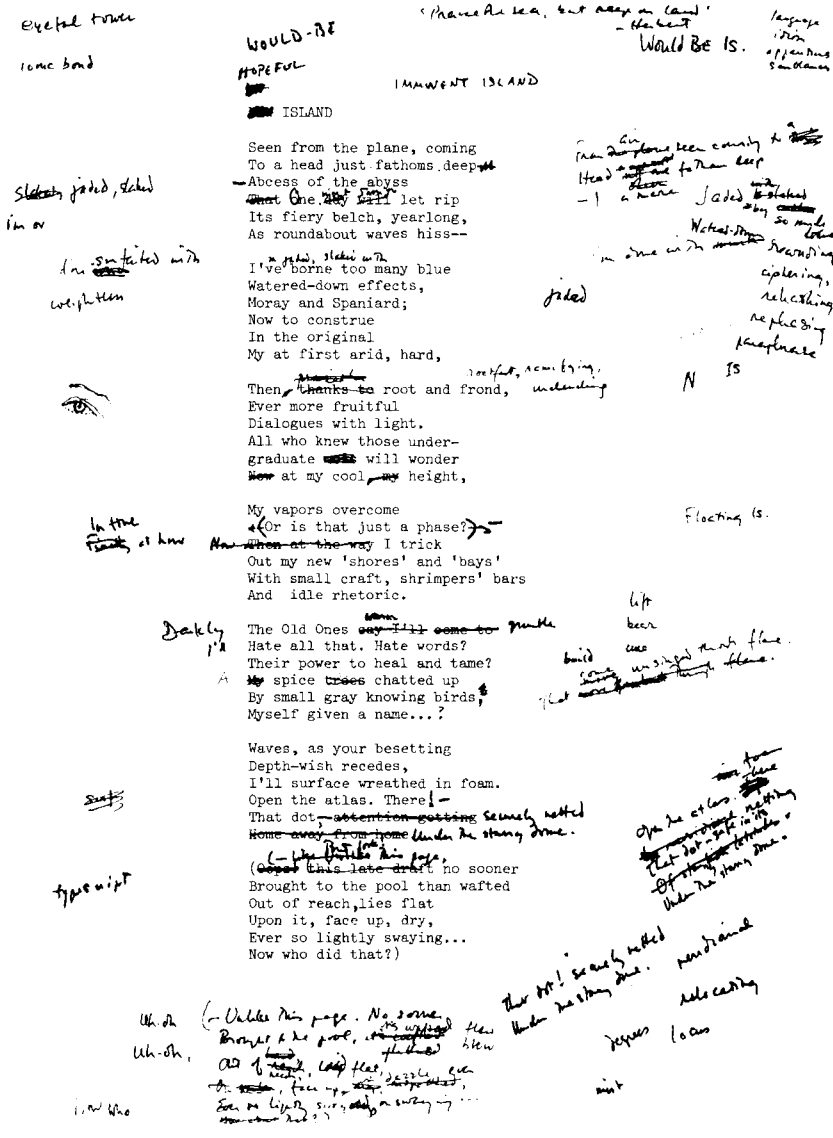
WOULD-BE
HOPEFUL
IMMANENT ISLAND
ISLAND
Would Be Is.
Seen from the plane, coming
To a head just fathoms deep
Abcess of the abyss
One day will let rip
Its fiery belch, yearlong,
As roundabout waves hiss--
I've borne too many blue
Watered-down effects,
Moray and Spaniard;
Now to construe
In the original
My at first arid, hard,
Then, thanks to root and frond,
Ever more fruitful
Dialogues with light.
All who knew those under-
graduate will wonder
at my cool height,
My vapors overcome
(Or is that just a phase?)
When at the way I trick
Out my new 'shores' and 'bays'
With small craft, shrimpers' bars
And idle rhetoric.
The Old Ones will come to grumble
Hate all that. Hate words?
Their power to heal and tame?
spice chatted up
By small gray knowing birds,
Myself given a name...?
Waves, as your besetting
Depth-wish recedes,
I'll surface wreathed in foam.
Open the atlas. There!
That dot, attention-getting
Home away from home
(this late draft
Brought to the pool than wafted
Out of reach, lies flat
Upon it, face up, dry,
Ever so lightly swaying...
Now who did that?)

A manuscript page of the poem "Island in the Works" which appears in final form on page 224.

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Thomas Victor

The Art of Poetry XXXI
James Merrill

My first glimpse of James Merrill, a dozen years ago, was in black-and-white. It was a photograph of him, in the Brinnin and Read anthology called The Modern Poets. *He had just turned toward the camera—his mouth slightly open, as if not expecting an observer—from a piano on which was propped a mazy score. He had on an open white dress shirt, which had the effect of elongating his neck, of giving his seated figure a slim, tense elegance. There was a pack of Chesterfields on a table in the foreground, and the edge of a potted fern.*

When I visited him during July 1981, it was as if that old photograph had been retouched—by time, and in color. The

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*piano is on the top floor of the poet's house in Stonington, Connecticut, and he was playing it when I walked in. He turned, as if surprised. This time he was wearing a royal blue T-shirt and white slacks. His face was older, but the lines draw out a puckish quality in his features. He remains slim, his brown hair silvered, and now he smokes Camels. He had been practicing the Adagio of Haydn's Sonata in A, the one with the plucked arpeggio accompaniment—and the source, Merrill supposes, of Granados's "The Lady and the Nightingale," itself the source (he grins) of "*Besame mucho.*"*

We are in a big room, airy, sunny, nearly all windows, with a chessboard linoleum floor. Merrill and David Jackson, with whom he has lived for nearly thirty years, added this rooftop room to the building on Water Street they bought in 1956. There are shops on the ground floor, rented apartments on the second; the top two stories are theirs. (For years the outside was a dull aubergine, but it had just been repainted a shade of leg-makeup.) Soon after, they had enclosed the roof and added a planked deck that overlooks the village and a dazzling swatch of Long Island Sound; in the cellar of nearby Connecticut College's museum they found a marble bust of the Roman emperor Otho. It was sold to them for a song. Blackface removed, it was set up outside, and presides over the deck.

Inside, near where the poet had been practicing at the baby Steinway, is a circle: three eccentric chairs and a Victorian sofa in one of Fortuny's magic-formula stamped cottons, low cases of novels and Gallimard paperbacks (one case hides a futon), and a free-standing garlic-head fireplace that from one end of the room faces a huge Larry Rivers landscape at the other.

Merrill has a reputation for being one of the best readers of poetry before the public. One hears why. His light baritone, with its urbane accent, has an expressive range of inflections. He laughs easily, and has a quick, enharmonic wit. On second thought, it is like his poetic voice. There is a self-possession to it that guards an abiding seriousness difficult to draw out—and thereby the more convincing.

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INTERVIEWER

You've left your house in Athens for good now, right?

MERRILL

It looks that way.

INTERVIEWER

And your original decision to settle there—was that just an accumulation of accidents?

MERRILL

Oh, there's no accident. I went first to Greece to visit Kimon Friar in 1950. Between then and 1959, when I went back with David, we'd gone to a great number of other places too—to the Orient and, either together or separately, all over Europe, except Greece. And suddenly here was a place—I can't tell you how much we liked it. We liked Stonington, too, but didn't want to stay there all year round. It had slowly dawned on us, as it continues to dawn on young people in Stonington, that it's a community of older people by and large. Nearly all our friends were five to *fifty* years older than we were. And in Greece we began seeing, for a change, people our own age, or younger.

INTERVIEWER

I presume you came to Stonington to get away from New York. If, by analogy, you went to Athens to get away from things in America, what was it you found there?

MERRILL

Things that have mostly disappeared, I'm afraid. The dazzling air, the drowsy waterfronts. Our own ignorance, even: a language we didn't understand two words of at first. That *was* a holiday! You could imagine that others were saying extraordinarily fascinating things—the point was to invent, if not what they were saying, at least its implications, its overtones. Also, in those days foreign tourists were both rare and welcome, and the

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delighted surprise with which the Greeks acknowledged our ability to put two words together, you know, was irresistible.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of people did you find yourselves falling in with? Other Americans?

MERRILL

No, certainly not. In fact, even Greeks who spoke English or French had to be extremely charming for us to want to see them more than once. We wanted to learn Greek and we also wanted to learn *Greece*, and the turn of mind that made a Greek.

INTERVIEWER

It can't be accidental, then, that your leaving Greece coincides with the completion of your trilogy—

MERRILL

Probably not. A coincidence over which I had no control was that, within a year of my finishing the trilogy, David had come to see that Athens was no longer a livable place. We'd both seen this day coming, I'm afraid, but for one reason or another neither of us wanted to believe his eyes. If he'd stayed on, I'd still be going back and forth. Maria might have been another reason for staying. Even after her death—or especially after her death, as her role in the poem grew clearer—I couldn't have faced, right away, cutting ourselves off from the friends we'd had in common, friends also in their own right, who made all the difference.

INTERVIEWER

That's Maria Mitsotáki? Was she really—

MERRILL

Everything I say she was in the trilogy? Oh yes, and more. Her father had indeed been Prime Minister, three times I think—but under which king? Constantine I or George II, or both? I'm vague about things like that. I'm vague too about

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her husband, who died long before our time. They'd lived in South Africa, in London... Maria went home for a visit and was stranded in Athens during the whole German occupation. Horrible stories—and wonderful ones: dashing young cousins in the Underground, hidden for weeks in bedroom closets. Literary men fell in love with her, quite understandably—aside from being an enchantment to look at, she *never missed a thing you said*.

INTERVIEWER

Your trilogy attests to a warm, intimate relationship with Maria Mitsotáki and W. H. Auden. Did working on the poem *change* your feelings about them?

MERRILL

In a way, yes. The friendships, which had been merely "real" on earth—subject to interruption, mutual convenience, states of health, like events that have to be scheduled "weather permitting"—became ideal. Nothing was hazed over by reticence or put off by a cold snap. Whenever we needed them, there they were; and a large part of *that* wonder was to feel how deeply they needed *us*. I can't pretend to have known Wystan terribly well in *this* world. He liked me, I think, and approved of my work; and liked the reassurance of David's and my being in Athens to stand by Chester Kallman [Auden's friend and collaborator] when emergencies arose. But he was twenty years older and had been famous while I was still in boarding-school, and—well, it took the poem, and the almost jubilant youthfulness he recovers after death, to get me over my shyness. With Maria it was different. In the years we knew her she saw very few people, but we were part of that happy few. Many of her old friends whom she no longer saw couldn't imagine what had come over her—"she's given us up for those *Americans*!" We simply adored her. It seemed like the perfection of intimacy, light, airy, without confessions or possessiveness—yet one would have to be Jung or Dante to foresee her role in the poem.

INTERVIEWER

You hadn't even an inkling of that role when you began the

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poem?

MERRILL

Oh no. It's true, I began "Ephraim" within days of hearing that she'd died—and felt, I suppose, enough of a coincidence to list her among the characters. There's only one mention of her in the whole "Book of Ephraim," yet I kept her in, and look what happened! The cassia shrub on the terrace—how could the poem have ended without it? I couldn't bring *it* home to America, though I did the next best thing and sneaked some seedpods through customs. They've given rise to that rather promising affair out there on the deck.

INTERVIEWER

Panning the Ouija board transcripts for poetic gold—*that* must have been a daunting project. How did you go about it?

MERRILL

The problem changed from volume to volume. With "Ephraim," many of the transcripts I had made from Ouija board sessions had vanished, or hadn't been saved. So I mainly used whatever came to hand, except for the high points which I'd copied out over the years into a special notebook. Those years—time itself—did my winnowing for me. With *Mirabell* it was, to put it mildly, harder. The transcript was enormous. What you see in the poem might be half, or two-fifths, of the original. Most of the cuts were repetitions: things said a second or third time, in new ways often, to make sure we'd understood. Or further, unnecessary illustrations of a point. I haven't looked at them for several years now, and can only hope that nothing too vital got left out. Getting it onto the page seemed really beyond me at first, perhaps because I'd begun imagining a poem the same length as "Ephraim." By the time the 14-syllable line occurred to me (that exchange with Wystan is largely contrived) I'd also decided where to divide it into books, so it all got under way at last.

With *Scripts*, there was no shaping to be done. Except for the minutest changes, and deciding about line-breaks and so forth,

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the Lessons you see on the page appear just as we took them down. The doggerel at the fêtes, everything. In between the Lessons—our chats with Wystan or Robert [Morse] or Uni [the trilogy's resident unicorn]—I still felt free to pick and choose; but even there, the design of the book just swept me along.

INTERVIEWER

You don't feel that too much was sacrificed for the sake of shapeliness?

MERRILL

If so, perhaps no accident? I came upon the pages of one of our very earliest evenings with Ephraim. He's giving us a lecture about the senses: POLISH THE WINDOWS OF YOUR EYES, etc., each sense in turn. That obviously prefigures, by over twenty years, one of the themes crucial to Volume 3—but isn't it nicer and less daunting somehow to have it emerge casually, without pedantry?

Then there were things outside the transcript—things in "life" which kept staring me in the face, only I couldn't see them, as if I'd been hypnotized, until the danger was past. Only this year I was in my study, playing the perhaps ten thousandth game of Patience since beginning "Ephraim." I'm using my old, nearly effaced Greek cards with their strange neoclassical royalties; and I do a little superstitious trick when I'm through. I reassemble the deck so that the Queen of Hearts is at the bottom, facing up. Now on those old-style Greek cards the Queens are all marked K, for Kyria—Lady. It's what George calls Mother Nature, and I'd simply never made the connection. Furthermore the Kings are all marked B, for Basileus. God B of Hearts? "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" You can be sure I'd have dragged all that in if I'd thought of it in time. Plus another clever but expendable allusion to the graveyard scene of the *Rake*, where Tom calls upon the Queen of Hearts and is saved. Driven out of his wits, but saved.

Other things, that in retrospect seem indispensible, came to hand just when they were needed, as if by magic. Stephen Yenser explaining the Golden Section when I was halfway

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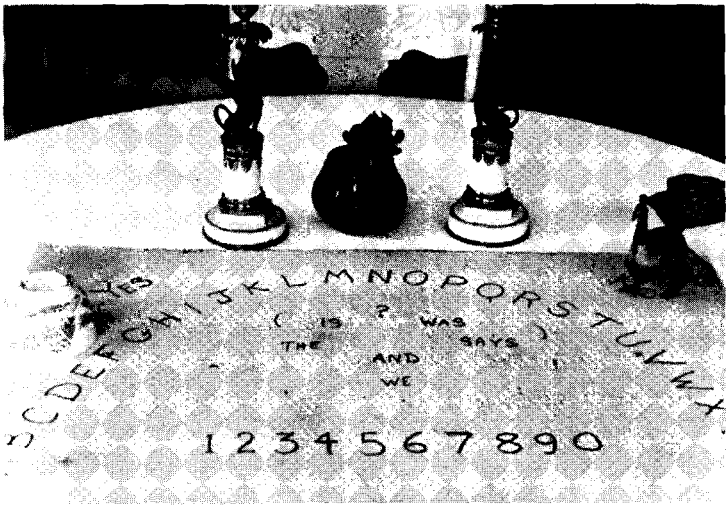

In the Stonington dining room, JM and DJ's board & teacup—and the "painted tin/Dimestore peacock, given us once in joke."

through "Ephraim." Marilyn Lavin telling me about the X-rayed Giorgione—I'd already written V and W—and hunting up the relevant article. Stephen Orgel's book on the masque, which he sent me not a moment too soon. A friend of my nephew's, Michael Beard, writing me a letter on the metaphysical implications of Arabic calligraphy. A month or so later I would simply need to versify some of his phrases in order to make that little lyric about the Bismillah formula. Then Alfred Corn's joke about E—Ephraim—equalling any emcee squared. I felt like a perfect magpie.

INTERVIEWER

What do the Ouija transcripts look like?

MERRILL

Like first-grade compositions. Drunken lines of capitals lurching across the page, gibberish until they're divided into words and sentences. It depends on the pace. Sometimes the powers take pity on us and slow down.

INTERVIEWER

The Ouija board, now. I gather you use a homemade one,

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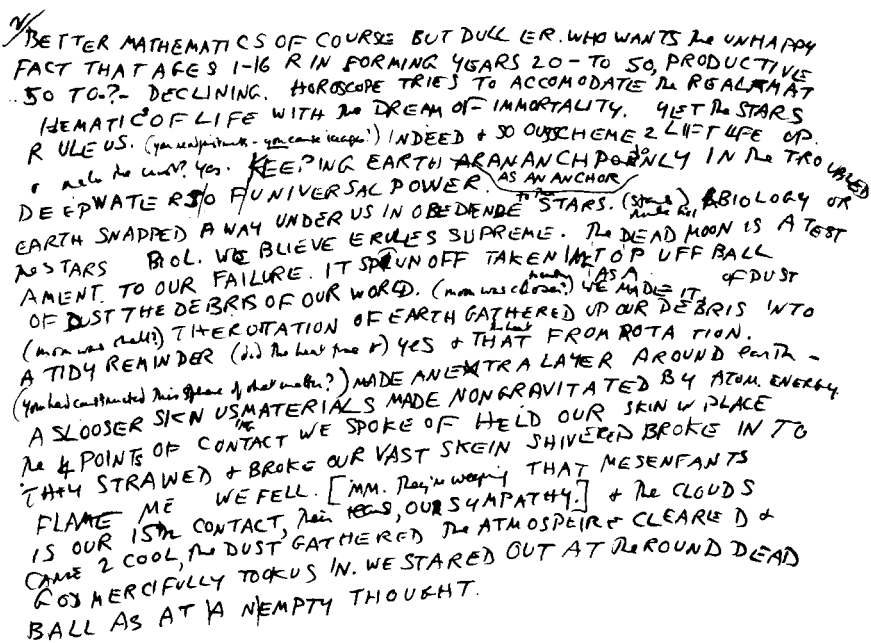
but that doesn't exactly help me to imagine it or its workings. An overturned teacup is your pointer?

MERRILL

Yes. The commercial boards come with a funny see-through planchette on legs. I find them too cramped. Besides, it's so easy to make your own—just write out the alphabet, and the numbers, and your YES and NO (punctuation marks too, if you're going all out) on a big sheet of cardboard. Or use brown paper—it travels better. On our Grand Tour, whenever we felt lonely in the hotel room, David and I could just unfold our instant company. He puts his right hand lightly on the cup, I put my left, leaving the right free to transcribe, and away we go. We get, oh, 500 to 600 words an hour. Better than gasoline.

INTERVIEWER

What *is* your fuel, would you say? With all the other disci-


BETTER MATHEMATICS OF COURSE BUT DULLER. WHO WANTS THE UNHAPPY FACT THAT AGES 1-16 R IN FORMING YEARS 20 - TO 50, PRODUCTIVE 50 TO ?- DECLINING. HOROSCOPE TRIES TO ACCOMODATE THE REALISTIC IDEMATIC OF LIFE WITH THE DREAM OF IMMORTALITY. YET THE STARS RULE US. (you can't print that - you can't escape.) INDEED & SO OUR SCHEME 2 LIFT LIFE UP & make the world? yes. KEEPING EARTH AS AN ANCHOR ONLY IN THE TROUBLED DEEP WATERS OF UNIVERSAL POWER. AS AN ANCHOR (stars) BIOLOGY OR EARTH SNAPPED AWAY UNDER US IN OBEDIENCE STARS. (stars) BIOLOGY OR NO STARS BIOL. WE BELIEVE ERULES SUPREME. THE DEAD MOON IS A TEST AMENT. TO OUR FAILURE. IT SPUN OFF TAKEN IMTOP UFF BALL OF DUST THE DEBRIS OF OUR WORLD. (man was close.) WE MADE IT. (man was really!) THE ROTATION OF EARTH GATHERED UP OUR DEBRIS INTO A TIDY REMINDER (did the last one?) YES & THAT FROM ROTATION. (You had constructed this system of that matter?) MADE AN EXTRA LAYER AROUND EARTH - A SLOOSER SKIN US MATERIALS MADE NONGRAVITATED BY ATOM. ENERGY IN WE SPOKE OF HELD OUR SKIN W PLACE THE 4 POINTS OF CONTACT SHIVERED BROKE IN TO THEM STRAWED & BROKE OUR VAST SKEIN THAT MESENFANTS FLAME ME WE FELL. [MM. Regin weeping] & THE CLOUDS IS OUR CONTACT, HEAD, OUR SYMPATHY. CAME 2 COOL, THE DUST GATHERED THE ATMOSPEIRE CLEARED & GOD MERCIFULLY TOOK US IN. WE STARED OUT AT THE ROUND DEAD BALL AS AT A NEMPTY THOUGHT.

A Ouija transcript page from the summer of 1976. Reworked in **Mirabell, 2.2**

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plines available to a poet, why this one?

MERRILL

Well, don't you think there comes a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the Self? To reach, if you like, the "god" within you? The board, in however clumsy or absurd a way, allows for precisely that. Or if it's still *yourself* that you're drawing upon, then that self is much stranger and freer and more far-seeing than the one you thought you knew. Of course there are disciplines with grander pedigrees and similar goals. The board happens to be ours. I've stopped, by the way, recommending it to inquisitive friends.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start using a Ouija board?

MERRILL

Frederick Buechner gave me one as a birthday present in 1953. As I recall, we sat down then and there to try it, and got a touching little story from a fairly simple soul—that engineer "dead of cholera in Cairo," who'd met Goethe. I used it in the first thing I ever wrote about the Ouija board (a poem called "Voices from the Other World"), although by that time the *experiences* behind this poem were mine and David's. We started in the summer of 1955. But the spirit *we* contacted—Ephraim—was anything but simple. So much so that for a long time I felt that the material he dictated really couldn't be used—then or perhaps ever. I felt it would be like cheating, or plagiarizing from some unidentifiable source. Oh, I put a few snippets of it into *The Seraglio*, but that was just a novel, and didn't count. Twenty years later, though, I was yet again trying to tell the whole story as fiction, through a set of characters bearing little resemblance to David or me. I'd got about fifty pages done, hating every bit of it. I'm not a novelist, and never was. No accident, then, that I simply "forgot" the manuscript in a taxi in Atlanta, and never recovered it—well, all that's described in "The Book of Ephraim." But I went on, I didn't take the hint. I put together all the drafts and notes for those lost pages, and proceeded to forget *these* in a hotel room

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in Frankfurt! By now I was down to just two pages of an opening draft. As I sat glaring at them, the prose began to dissolve into verse. I marked the line-breaks with a pencil, fiddled a bit, typed it up, and showed the two versions to a friend who said quite firmly: "You must never write prose again." At that point "The Book of Ephraim" crystallized, and got written without any particular trouble.

INTERVIEWER

Throughout the trilogy you have many "voices"—Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, Pythagoras, Nefertiti... How does this work? Do they simply break in, or do you ask specifically for them?

MERRILL

Either way. Most of the time, we never knew what to expect. Last summer, for instance, we were about to sit down at the board—no, I was already in my chair—when David called from the kitchen. He can never keep abreast of the rising postal rates, and wanted to know which stamp to put on his letter. I called back, "Put on an Edna St. Vincent Millay"—I'd bought a sheet of her commemoratives just that week. And when we started at the board, there she was. Very embarrassing on both sides, as it dawned on the poor creature that we hadn't meant to talk to *her* at all.

INTERVIEWER

Does what Auden tells you via the Ouija board remind you of him... I mean, are there distinctive phrases or sentiments that could only be his?

MERRILL

Some of his best-known sentiments get revised—his Christian views, for instance—but the turns of phrase sound very like him, to my ears. Remember, though, that we never knew each other well, not in *this* world.

INTERVIEWER

Would the Ouija board be your instrument—like a key-

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board on which a musician composes or improvises?

MERRILL

Not a bit! If anything, the keyboard was us. And our one obligation, at any given session, was to be as "well-tempered" as possible.

INTERVIEWER

So the Ouija board is by no means a mnemonic device—it is not something to get you going. . .

MERRILL

No. At least not something to start me *writing*. In other ways, evidently, it did start us "going"—thinking, puzzling, resisting, testing the messages against everything we knew or thought possible.

INTERVIEWER

What is David's function when you use the Ouija board?

MERRILL

That's a good question. According to Mirabell, David is the subconscious shaper of the message itself, the "Hand" as they call him. Of the two of us, he's the spokesman for human nature, while I'm the "Scribe," the one in whose words and images the message gets expressed. This would be a fairly rough distinction, but enough to show that the transcripts as they stand could never have come into being without him. I wonder if the trilogy shouldn't have been signed with both our names—or simply "by DJ, as told to JM"?

INTERVIEWER

Could not the "they" who move the teacup around the board be considered the authors of the poems?

MERRILL

Well, yes and no. As "they" keep saying throughout, language is the human medium. It doesn't exist—except perhaps as vast mathematical or chemical formulas—in that realm of,

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oh, cosmic forces, elemental processes, whom *we* then personify, or tame if you like, through the imagination. So, in a sense, all these figures are our creation, or mankind's. The powers they represent are real—as, say, gravity is "real"—but they'd be invisible, inconceivable, if they'd never passed through our heads and clothed themselves out of the costume box they found there. *How* they appear depends on us, on the imaginer, and would have to vary wildly from culture to culture, or even temperament to temperament. A process that Einstein could entertain as a formula might be described by an African witch doctor as a crocodile. What's tiresome is when people exclusively insist on the forms they've imagined. Those powers don't need churches in order to be sacred. What they do need are fresh ways of being seen.

INTERVIEWER

Does the idea of the Ouija board ever embarrass you—I mean that you have this curious collaborator?

MERRILL

From what I've just said, you see how pompous I can get. The mechanics of the board—this absurd, flimsy contraption, creaking along—serves wonderfully as a hedge against inflation. I think it does embarrass the sort of reader who can't bear to face the random or trivial elements that coalesce, among others, to produce an "elevated" thought. That doesn't bother me *at all*.

INTERVIEWER

Does the Ouija board ever manifest maniacal tendencies? Do you ever feel yourself lost in its grip?

MERRILL

Thanks perhaps to a certain ongoing resistance, we seem to have held our own. We kept it as a parlor game for the first twenty years. Those early voices in *Mirabell* gave us, I admit, a nasty turn. Looking back, though, I've the sense that we *agreed* to let them take us over, for the sake of the poem. Poems can do that, even when you think you're writing them all by yourself.

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Oh, we've been scared at times. A friend, who sat with us at the board just once, went on to have a pretty awful experience with some people out in Detroit. She was told to go West, and to sail on a certain freighter on a certain day, and the name of the island where she'd meet her great-grandmother reincarnated as a Polynesian teenager who would guide her to a mountain cave where in turn an old man . . . and so forth. Luckily she collapsed before she ever made it to California. I don't believe she was being manipulated by the other people. The experience sounds genuine. But she didn't have the strength to use it properly—whatever I mean by that! It would seem that David and I *have* that strength; or else, that we've been handled with kid gloves. A number of friends have been scared *for* us over the years. One of them took me to a Trappist monastery, to talk to one of the more literary priests. It was a lovely couple of hours. I read from some of the transcripts, filling in as much as I could of the background. Afterwards, the priest admitted that they'd all been warned in Seminary against these devilish devices, but that, frankly, I'd read nothing to him that he didn't believe himself. I suspect a lot of people use the board to guide them through life—"What's next week's winning lottery number?"—and get the answers they deserve. Our voices are often very illuminating when we bring up a dilemma or a symptom, but they never *tell* us what to do. At most they suggest the possibilities, the various consequences. Now that I think of it, our friend might have misread a hint for a command, or a metaphorical itinerary of self-discovery for a real trip to Hawaii.

INTERVIEWER

What about more conventional aids to inspiration—drugs? Drink?

MERRILL

Liquor, in my parents's world, was always your reward at the end of a hard day—or an easy day, for that matter—and I like to observe that old family tradition. But I've never drunk for inspiration. Quite the contrary—it's like the wet sponge on the blackboard. I do now and then take a puff of grass, or a crumb of Alice Toklas fudge, when I've reached the last drafts of a

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poem. That's when you need X-ray eyes to see what you've done, and the grass helps. Some nice touches can fall into place.

INTERVIEWER

In hindsight, do you have any general feelings about the occult, about the *use* of the occult in poetry?

MERRILL

I've never much liked hearing about it. Usually the people who write about it have such dreadful style. Yeats is almost the only exception I can think of. The first thing to do is to get rid of that awful vocabulary. It's almost acceptable once it's purged of all those fancy words—"auras" and "astral bodies."

INTERVIEWER

Has it been a kind of displaced religion for you? I take it you *have* a religious streak somewhere in you.

MERRILL

Oh, that's a very good phrase for it—"displaced religion." I never felt at home with the "pastoral" Episcopalianism I was handed. Unctuous mouthings of scripture, a system that like the courtier-shepherds and milkmaids at the Petit Trianon seemed almost willfully deluded, given the state of the world and the fears and fantasies already raging in my little head. Mademoiselle's Catholicism corresponded more to these. She taught me the Ave Maria—without which the Lord's Prayer calls up the image of dry bread in a motherless reformatory. Even her Jesus, next to the Protestant one, was all blood and magic—the face on Veronica's napkin, the ghastly little Sacred Heart hanging above her bed, like something out of a boy's book about Aztec sacrifice, or something the gardener pulled out of the earth. These images *connected*. I mean we used napkins the size of Veronica's at every meal. As Shaw reminds us, Christ wasn't out to proselytize. He said that God was in each of us, a spark of pure potential. He held no special brief for the Family. All very sensible, but I'm afraid I've long since thrown

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out the baby with the churchly bathwater. The need, as you say, remained. I never cared for the pose of the atheist—though the Angels came round to that, you know, in their way, insisting on man as master of his own destiny.

INTERVIEWER

You don't describe yourself as having been a very good student, and still seem a bit self-conscious as an "intellectual."

MERRILL

Ummmh . . .

INTERVIEWER

No accident, then, that the trilogy's caps are all unrelieved meaning? A case of the return of the repressed?

MERRILL

You're probably exactly right there, at least where the "Grand Design" is concerned. Also in passages—like Mirabell on Culture or Technology—where the proliferation of crisp ideas sounds almost like a Shaw preface. Not at all the kind of page I could turn out by myself. On the other hand, a lot of what we're loosely calling "meaning" turns out, on inspection, to be metaphor, which leads one back towards language: wordplay, etymology, the "wholly human instrument" (as Wystan says) I'd used and trusted—like every poet, wouldn't you say?—to ground the lightning of ideas. We could say that the uppercase represented a *range* of metaphor, a depth of meaning, that hadn't been available to me in earlier poems. Victor Hugo described his voices as his own conscious powers multiplied by five, and *he* was probably exactly right there, too.

INTERVIEWER

Though your trilogy takes up the ultimate question of origins and destiny, you are not a poet—like Yeats or Auden or Lowell—who has taken on political issues in your work. Or is that very avoidance itself a kind of "stand"?

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MERRILL

The lobbies? The candidates's rhetoric—our "commitments abroad"? The Shah as Helen of Troy launching a thousand missile carriers? One whiff of all that, and I turn purple and start kicking my cradle. I like the idea of nations, actually, and even more those pockets of genuine strangeness within nations. Yet those are being emptied, turned inside out, made to conform—in the interest of what? The friendly American smile we're told to wear in our passport photos? Oh, it's not just in America. You can go to an outdoor concert in Athens—in that brown, poisonous air the government isn't strong enough to do anything about—and there are the President and the Prime Minister in their natty suits, surrounded by flashbulbs, hugging and patting each other as if they hadn't met for months. God have mercy on whoever's meant to be impressed by that. Of course I can't conceive of anyone *choosing* public life, unless from some unspeakable hidden motive.

INTERVIEWER

What newspapers do you read?

MERRILL

In Europe the Paris *Herald*—I get very American over there, and it's so concise. Here, I never learned how to read a paper. My first year away at school, I watched my classmates, some of them littler than I was, frowning over the war news or the financial page. They already knew how! I realized then and there I couldn't hope to catch up. I told this to Marianne Moore before introducing her at her Amherst reading in 1956. She looked rather taken aback, as I did myself, a half hour later, when in the middle of a poem she was reading—a poem I thought I knew—I heard my name. "Now Mr. Merrill," she was saying, "tells me he doesn't read a newspaper. That's hard for me to understand. The things one would miss! Why, only last week I read that our U.S. Customs Bureau was collecting all the egret and bird-of-paradise feathers we'd confiscated during the 'twenties and 'thirties—collecting them and sending them off to Nepal, where they're *needed*. . . ." And then she went right on with her poem.

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INTERVIEWER

I'll have to interrupt. Why were those feathers needed in Nepal?

MERRILL

Oh, headdresses, regalia...*you* must remember—the papers were full of it!

But let's be serious for a moment. If our Angels are right, every leader—president or terrorist—is responsible for keeping his ranks thinned out. Good politics would therefore encourage death in one form or another—if not actual, organized bloodshed, then the legalization of abortion or, heaven forbid, the various chemical or technological atrocities. Only this last strikes me as truly immoral, perhaps because it's a threat that hadn't existed before my own lifetime. I take it personally. That bit in "The Broken Home"—"Father Time and Mother Earth, / A marriage on the rocks"—isn't meant as a joke. History in our time *has* cut loose, *has* broken faith with Nature. But poems, even those of the most savage incandescence, can't deal frontally with such huge, urgent subjects without sounding grumpy or dated when they should still be in their prime. So my parents' divorce dramatized on a human scale a subject that couldn't have been handled otherwise. Which is what a "poetic" turn of mind allows for. You don't see eternity *except* in the grain of sand, or history except at the family dinner table.

By the time I returned, three months later, to resume our conversation, the cassia had been potted with a seaweed mulch, moved to an exposed spot indoors (but chaperoned by a matronly Norfolk pine), bloomed, and shed a buttercup dandruff all over the bookcase and stairwell. Down those stairs to the right is Merrill's study. To the left, where we turn, are the living and dining rooms, and the rest of the house. These rooms have best been described in Merrill's own poems. Section B of "The Book of Ephraim" sketches the dining room, scene of so many séances: the "walls of ready-mixed matte 'flame' " with their collage of pictures and icons; the "turn of the century dome / Expressing white tin wreathes and fleur-de-lys / In palpable relief to candlelight"; under it, the milk glass tabletop, no

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Ouija board on it today. (With his trilogy completed, the poet tells me, he never "uses" the board to spring a poem; in fact, he and DJ rarely consult it—"perhaps a courtesy call when the moon's full, or to see that a recently dead friend gets in with the right crowd. They *say it's time we weaned ourselves from all this—do admit they have a point.")*

But we sit in the living room, whose rug, wallpaper, and immense Victorian mirror dominate the opening pages of Mirabell. *A cardtable has been set up in the middle of the room, where the poet has been opening and answering his mail. There is a great deal of clutter, which adds to the impression of a boutique fantasque. What is* not *in this room? There are two chairs, a horsehair divan where we sit, and an Eames chair. A watercolor by a friend in Atlanta had just arrived and the only place for it is the Eames; so there* he *sits, a whimsical hussar with a fennel shako, whose greatcoat's fur collar turns into a caterpillar. There are piles of new books here and there, a heap of magazines in a swan-clip (I can see* Time, Scientific American, The New York Review of Books*). There is a Maxfield Parrish that belonged to his father, a Madeleine Lemaire (*not *roses, but violets), and half a dozen other pictures. On cabinets and tables against the walls are cacti and shells, a glass bowl filled with glass globes, a tanagra, an Instamatic, a snapshot of his goddaughter, medallions and boxes, a wooden nickel, a pair of miniature cloisonné deer, a Javanese puppet-head on a pin, a Venetian mask, an upheld hand of the Buddha. . .*

The poet pours out two cups of Hu Kwa.

INTERVIEWER

You had a very privileged childhood, in the normal sense of "privileged"—wealth, advantages. But the privilege also of being able to turn the pain of that childhood into art. How do you look back on it now?

MERRILL

Perhaps turning it into art came naturally. . . I mean, it's hard to speak of a child having a sense of reality or unreality, because after all what are his criteria? It strikes me now maybe that during much of my childhood I found it difficult to *believe* in the way my parents lived. They seemed so utterly taken up

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with engagements, obligations, ceremonies—every child must feel that, to some extent, about the grown-ups in his life. The excitement, the emotional quickening *I* felt in those years came usually through animals or nature, or through the servants in the house—Colette knew all about that—whose lives seemed by contrast to make such perfect *sense*. The gardeners had their hands in the earth. The cook was dredging things with flour, making pies. My father was merely making money, while my mother wrote names on place-cards, planned menus, and did her needlepoint. Her masterpiece—not the imaginary fire screen I describe in the poem—depicted the façade of the Southampton house. I could see how stylized it was. The designer had put these peculiar flowers all over the front lawn, and a stereotyped old black servant on either side. Once in a while my mother would let me complete a stitch. It fascinated me. It had nothing really to do with the world, yet somehow... Was it the world becoming art?

INTERVIEWER

The picture your poems paint of yourself as a child is of someone who's bored. Were you?

MERRILL

We shouldn't exaggerate. There were things I enjoyed enormously, like fishing—something responding and resisting from deep, deep down. It's true, sometimes I must have been extremely bored, though never inactive. My mother remembers asking me, when I was five or six, what I wanted to do when I was grown up. Didn't I want, she asked, to go downtown and work in Daddy's office? "Oh no," I said, "I'll be too tired by then." Because, you see, everything was arranged: to so-and-so's house to play, the beach for lunch, a tennis lesson. As we know, the life of leisure doesn't give us a moment's rest. I didn't care for the games or the playmates. I don't recall there being anyone I really liked, my own age, until I went away to school.

INTERVIEWER

There may be links between that boredom and an impulse to

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write, to make up a life of your own. I suppose you were a great reader as a child?

MERRILL

Was I? I loved stories, but can't remember being very curious about the books in the library. Once, all by myself, I opened a copy of Barrie's *Dear Brutus* to the following unforgettable bit of dialogue: "Where is your husband, Alice?" "In the library, sampling the port." Now I knew what port was: it was where ships went. And I knew what a sample was because even *I* had been consulted as to new wallpaper and upholstery. Suddenly a surrealist bit of language! But generally I read what I was told to read, not always liking it. My mother gave me *Mrs. Wiggs and the Cabbage Patch* and I remember throwing it out the window. By then I was. . . eight? A couple of years later I read *Gone With the Wind*. No one told me there were any other novels, *grown-up* novels. I must have read it six or seven times in succession; I thought it was one of a kind. As for *good* literature—one got a bit of it at school, but not at home.

INTERVIEWER

You began writing at that age too?

MERRILL

I had written at least one poem when I was seven or eight. It was a poem about going with the Irish setter into my mother's room—an episode that ended up in "The Broken Home." The Irish setter *was* named Michael and I think the poem began: "One day while she lay sleeping, / Michael and I went peeping." My first publication was in the *St. Nicholas* magazine, a quatrain: "Pushing slowly every day / Autumn finally makes its way. / Now when the days are cool, / We children go to school." They wanted a drawing to illustrate your verses. And that gave me my first *severe* aesthetic lesson, because when the poem and sketch were printed—the sketch showed a little boy on the crest of a hill heading for a schoolhouse far below—I saw to my consternation that, although I'd drawn the windows of the schoolhouse very carefully with a ruler, the editors had

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made them crooked, as befitted a child's drawing. Of course they were right. But the lesson sank in: one must act one's age and give people what they expect.

INTERVIEWER

A ballroom, empty of all but ghostly presences, is an image, or *scene* of instruction, that recurs in key poems during your career. I'm thinking of "A Tenancy" in *Water Street*, "The Broken Home" in *Nights and Days*, the Epilogue to the trilogy. It is a haunting image, and seems a haunted one as well. What associations and significance does that room have for you?

MERRILL

The original, the primal ballroom—in Southampton—would have made even a grown-up gasp. My brother once heard a Mrs. Jaeckel say, "Stanford White put his *heart* into this room." Four families could have lived in it. Two pianos *did*, and an organ, with pipes that covered the whole upper half of a wall, and a huge spiral column of gilded wood in each corner. And a monster stone fireplace with a buffalo head above it. At night it was often dark; people drank before dinner in the library. So that, after being sent to bed, I'd have to make my way through the ballroom in order to get upstairs. Once I didn't—I sat clutching my knees on one of the window seats, hidden by the twenty-foot-high red damask curtain, for hours it seemed, listening to my name being called throughout the house. Once I was allowed to stay up, before a party, long enough to see the chandeliers lit—hundreds of candles. It must have answered beautifully to my father's "Gatsby" side. It's a room I remember *him* in, not my mother. He took me aside there, one evening, to warn me—with tears in his eyes—against the drink in his hand. We didn't *call* it the ballroom—it was the music room. Some afternoons my grandmother played the organ, rather shyly. One morning a house guest, a woman who later gave me piano lessons in New York, played through the whole score of *Pagliacci* for me, singing and explaining. That was my first "opera." Looking back, even going back to visit while my father still had that house, I could

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see how much grander the room was than any of the uses we'd put it to, so maybe the ghostly presences appeared in order to make up for a thousand unrealized possibilities. That same sense probably accounts for my "redecoration" in the Epilogue—making the room conform to an ideal much sunnier, much more silvery, that I began to trust only as an adult, while keeping carefully out of my mind (until that passage had been written) the story of how Zeus cuts off the scrotum, or "ballroom," of his father Cronus and throws it into the sea where it begins to foam and shine, and the goddess of Love and Beauty is born.

INTERVIEWER

As a young poet starting out in the 50's, what did you look forward to? What did you imagine yourself writing in, say, 1975?

MERRILL

I was a perhaps fairly typical mixture of aspiration and diffidence. Certainly I could never see beyond the poem I was at work on. And since weeks or months could go by between poems, I tried to make each one "last" as long as possible, to let its meanings ever so slowly rise to the surface I peered into–enchanted and a touch bored. I looked forward, not without apprehension, to a lifetime of this.

INTERVIEWER

How would you now characterize the author of *The Black Swan*?

MERRILL

This will contradict my last answer about "starting out in the 50's." By then I'd come to see what hard work it was, writing a poem. But *The Black Swan*—those poems written in 1945 and 1946 had simply bubbled up. Each took an afternoon, a day or two at most. Their author had been recently dazzled by all kinds of things whose existence he'd never suspected, poets he'd never read before, like Stevens or Crane; techniques and forms that could be recovered or reinvented from the past without their having to sound old-fashioned, thanks to any number

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of stylish "modern" touches like slant rhyme or surrealist imagery or some tentative approach to the conversational ("Love, keep your eye peeled"). There were effects in Stevens, in the *Notes* which I read before anything else—his great ease in combining abstract words with gaudy visual or sound effects. . . "That alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala," or those "angular anonymids" in their blue and yellow stream. You didn't have to be exclusively decorative *or* in deadly earnest. You could be grand *and* playful. The astringent abstract word was always there to bring your little impressionist picture to its senses.

INTERVIEWER

But he—that is, the author of *The Black Swan*—is someone you now see as a kind of happy emulation of literary models?

MERRILL

No, not a bit. It seems to me, reading those poems over—and I've begun to rework a number of them—that the only limitation imposed upon them was my own youth and limited skill; whereas looking back on the poems in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, it seems to me that each of at least the shorter ones bites off much less than those early lyrics did. They seem the product of a more competent, but in a way smaller spirit. Returning to those early poems *now*, obviously in the light of the completed trilogy, I've had to marvel a bit at the resemblances. It's as though after a long lapse or, as you put it, displacement of faith, I'd finally, with the trilogy, reentered the church of those original themes. The colors, the elements, the magical emblems: they were the first subjects I'd found again at last.

INTERVIEWER

About the progress of a poem, a typical poem—one, say, you've never written—is it a *problem* that you feel nagging you and try to solve by writing? Are you led on by a subject, or by chance phrases?

MERRILL

Often it's some chance phrases, usually attached but not al-

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ways—not even always attached to a subject, though if the poem is to go anywhere it has somehow to develop a subject fairly quickly, even if that subject is a blank shape. A poem like "About the Phoenix"—I don't know where any of it came from, but it kept drawing particles of phrases and images to itself.

INTERVIEWER

But by "subject" you mean essentially an event, a person . . .

MERRILL

. . . a scene . . .

INTERVIEWER

. . . a landscape?

MERRILL

A kind of action . . .

INTERVIEWER

. . . that has not necessarily happened to you?

MERRILL

Hmmm. And then I think one problem that has presented itself over and over, usually in the case of a poem of a certain length, is that you've got to end up saying the right thing. A poem like "Scenes of Childhood" made for a terrible impasse because at the point where my "I" is waking up the next morning, after a bad night, I had him say that *dawn was worse*. It took me a couple of weeks to realize that this was something that couldn't be said under nearly any circumstances without being dishonest. Dawn is not worse, the sacred sun rises and things look up. Once I reversed myself, the poem ended easily enough. I had the same problem with "An Urban Convalescence," before writing those concluding quatrains. It broke off at the lowest point: "The heavy volume of the world / Closes again." But then something affirmative had to be made out of it.

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INTERVIEWER

You're so self-conscious about *not* striking attitudes that the word "affirmative" makes me wonder. . . .

MERRILL

No, think of music. I mean you don't *end* pieces with a dissonance.

INTERVIEWER

When you write a poem, do you imagine an immediate audience for it?

MERRILL

Oh, over the years I've collected a little anthology of ideal readers.

INTERVIEWER

Living and dead?

MERRILL

Now, now. . . But *yes*, why not? Living, dead, imaginary. Is this diction crisp enough for Herbert? Is this stanza's tessitura too high for Maggie Teyte? The danger with your close friends is that they're apt to take on faith what you *meant* to do in a poem, not what you've done. But who else has their patience? Three or four friends read the trilogy as it came out, a few pages at a time. I don't see how I could have kept going without their often very detailed responses.

INTERVIEWER

Are these reactions ever of any practical help? Would they lead you to change a line?

MERRILL

That's the point! Ideally you'd think of everything yourself, but in practice. . . There were two lines in "Ephraim," about a stream reflecting aspen. The word "aspen" ended one sentence, and "Boulders" began the next. Madison Morrison, out

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in Oklahoma, sent me this little note on that section: "Aspen. Boulders . . . Colorado Springs?" I'd never have seen that by myself. Nine times out of ten, of course, I use those misgivings to confirm what I've done. So-and-so thinks a passage is obscure? *Good*—it stays obscure: that'll teach him! No wonder that the most loyal reader gets lost along the way—feels disappointed by a turn you've taken, and simply gives up.

INTERVIEWER

Yet one of your strengths as a poet is so to disarm your reader, often by including his possible objections.

MERRILL

That might even be the placating gesture of a child who is inevitably going to disappoint his parents before he fulfills the expectations they haven't yet learned to have. I was always very good at seeming to accede to what my father or mother wanted of me—and then going ahead to do as I pleased.

We move into Merrill's small study. As a rule, he works here every day from early morning until noon. One wall is books, with a built-in daybed on which is laid out a balked game of Patience. On his desk are dictionaries. Next to it a blue Selectric sprouting a draft. Friends look on, from photographs thumbtacked to the wall behind. One is of Proust.

INTERVIEWER

You say in "The Book of Ephraim" that you've read Proust for the last time. Is that true?

MERRILL

I thought so when I said it, but in fact—just before starting to write the party scene which ends the Epilogue—I took a quick look at *Le Temps retrouvé*.

INTERVIEWER

In a sense, Proust has been the greatest influence on your ca-

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reer, wouldn't you agree?

MERRILL

I would.

INTERVIEWER

Odd for a poet to have a novelist over his shoulder.

MERRILL

Why? I certainly didn't feel his influence when I was writing novels. My attention span when writing or "observing" is so much shorter than his, that it's only in a poem—in miniature as it were—that something of his flavor might be felt.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of influences, one could mention Stevens, Auden, Bishop, a few others. What have you sought to learn from other poets, and how in general have you adapted their example to your practice?

MERRILL

Oh, I suppose I've learned things about writing, technical things, from each of them. Auden's penultimate rhyming, Elizabeth's way of contradicting something she's just said, Stevens' odd glamorizing of philosophical terms. Aside from all that, what I think I *really* wanted was some evidence that one didn't have to lead a "literary" life—belong to a ghetto of "creativity." That one could live as one pleased, and not be shamefaced in the glare of renown (if it ever came) at being an insurance man or a woman who'd moved to Brazil and played samba records instead of discussing X's latest volume. It was heartening that the *best* poets had this freedom. Auden did lead a life that looked literary from a distance, though actually I thought it was more a re-creation of school and university days: much instruction, much giggling, much untidiness. Perhaps because my own school years were unhappy for extracurricular reasons I didn't feel completely at ease with all that. So much was routine—and often wildly entertaining of course: once, a

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long lunchtime discussion with Chester Kallman about whether three nineteen- or twenty-year old guests who were expected for dinner should be offered *real drinks* culminated that evening in Wystan's removing three tiny, tiny glasses from the big hearts-and-flowers cupboard and asking *me* to "make vodka-and-tonics for our young friends." (I gave them straight vodka, of course.) The point's not that Wystan was stingy—or if he was, who cares?—but that his conflicting principles (Don't Waste Good Liquor on the Young versus *Gastrecht*, or the Sacred Duty of a Host) arrived at a solution that would have made Da Ponte smile. Soon everyone was having a good time. One of the young Englishmen proposed—this was late in the Sixties—that poems should appear in common, everyday places: on books of matches, beer cans, toilet paper. "I sense the need," said Chester rolling his eyes, "for applied criticism."

It was du côté de chez Elizabeth, though, that I saw the daily life that took my fancy even more, with its kind of random, Chekhovian surface, open to trivia and funny surprises, or even painful ones, today a fit of weeping, tomorrow a picnic. I could see how close that life was to her poems, how much the life and the poems gave to one another. I don't mean I've "achieved" anything of the sort in *my* life or poems, only that Elizabeth had more of a talent for life—and for poetry—than anyone else I've known, and this has served me as an ideal.

INTERVIEWER

When you read someone else's poem, what do you read *for*? What kind of pleasure do you take? What kind of hesitations do you have?

MERRILL

Well, I'm always open to what another poet might do with *the line*, or with a stanza. I don't know what particular turn of phrase I look for, but it's always very important, the phrasing of the lines—Elizabeth's elegy for Lowell struck me as such a masterpiece because you read the poem a couple of times and felt you knew it by heart. Every line fell in the most wonderful way, which is perhaps something she learned from Herbert. You

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find it *there*. I think you find it very often in French poetry.

INTERVIEWER

You're drawn, then, primarily to technical matters?

MERRILL

To the extent that the phrasing leads to the content. I don't really know how to separate those. The poems I most love are so perfectly phrased that they seem to say something extraordinary, whether they do or not.

INTERVIEWER

Increasingly, your work has exhibited a striking range in what would once have been called its poetic diction. Conversational stops and starts alternate with stanza-long sentences bristling with subordinate clauses. Scientific jargon lies down with slang. What guides these choices?

MERRILL

Taste, instinct, temperament. . . Too much poetry sounds like side after side of modern music, the same serial twitterings, the same barnyard grunts. Just as I love multiple meanings, I try for contrasts and disruptions of tone. Am I wrong—in the old days didn't the various meters imply different modes or situations, like madness, love, war? It's too late, in any event, to rely very much on meter—look at those gorgeous but imbecile antistrophes and semichoruses in Swinburne or Shelley or whoever. I'm talking from a reader's point of view, you understand. Poets will rediscover as many techniques as they need in order to help them write better. But for a reader who can hardly be trusted to hear the iambics when he opens "The Rape of the Lock," if anything can fill the void left by these obsolete resources, I'd imagine it would have to be diction or "voice." Voice in its fullest tonal range—not just bel canto or passionate speech. From my own point of view, this range would be utterly unattainable without meter and rhyme and those forms we are talking about.

Of course they breed echoes. There's always a lurking air of pastiche which, consciously or unconsciously, gets into your

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diction. That doesn't much bother me, does it you? No voice is as individual as the poet would like to think. In the long run I'd rather have what I write remind people of Pope or Yeats or Byron than of the other students in that year's workshop.

INTERVIEWER

The hallmark of your poetry is its *tone*, the way its concerns are observed and presented. And much of its effect depends on your fondness for paradox. Is that a cultivated habit of mind with you? A deliberate way into, and out of, the world and the poem?

MERRILL

It's hard to know. "Cultivated" certainly in the gardening sense of the word—which doesn't explain the mystery of the seed. I suppose that early on I began to understand the relativity, even the reversibility, of truths. At the same time as I was being given a good education I could feel, not so much from my parents, but from the world they moved in, that kind of easygoing contempt rich people have for art and scholarship—"these things are all right *in their place*, and their place is to ornament a life rather than to nourish or to shape it." Or when it came to sex, I had to face it that the worst iniquity my parents (and many of my friends) could imagine was for me a blessed source of pleasure and security—as well as suffering, to be sure. There was truth on both sides. And maybe having arrived at *that* explained my delight in setting down a phrase like, oh, "the pillow's dense white dark" or "Au fond each summit is a cul-de-sac," but the explanation as such neither delights nor convinces me. I believe the secret lies primarily in the nature of poetry—and of science too, for that matter—and that the ability to see both ways at once isn't merely an idiosyncrasy but corresponds to how the world needs to be seen: cheerful *and* awful, opaque *and* transparent. The plus and minus signs of a vast evolving formula.

INTERVIEWER

I want to come back to a phrase you just used—"pleasure and security." Would those twinned feelings also account for

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your affectionate and bracing reliance on traditional forms?

MERRILL

Yes, why not? Now and then one enjoys a little moonwalk, some little departure from tradition. And the forms themselves seem to invite this, in our age of "breakthroughs." Take the villanelle, which didn't really change from "Your eyen two wol slay me sodenly" until, say, 1950. With Empson's famous ones rigor mortis had set in, for any purposes beyond those of vers de société. Still, there were tiny signs. People began repunctuating the key lines so that, each time they recurred, the meaning would be slightly different. Was that just an extension of certain cute effects in Austin Dobson? In any case, "sodenly" Elizabeth's ravishing "One Art" came along, where the key lines seem merely to approximate themselves, and the form, awakened by a kiss, simply toddles off to a new stage in its life, under the proud eye of Mother, or the Muse. One doesn't, I mean, have to be just a stolid "formalist." The forms, the meters and rhyme-sounds, are far too liberating for that.

INTERVIEWER

Liberating?

MERRILL

From one's own smudged images and anxiety about "having something to say." *Into* the dynamics of—well, the craft itself.

INTERVIEWER

Few words can make contemporary poets cringe more than "great"—I mean, when applied to poems or poets. That's something that certainly doesn't hold for other arts, say, painting. Why do you suppose this is so? Is the whole category outdated?

MERRILL

I hope not. Just because "great" is now a talk show word meaning competent or agreeable, it doesn't follow that we have to take this lying down. It's really the bombast, the sun-

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less pedantry—waste products of ideas—that make us cringe. They form on a text like mildew. Straining for exaltation, coasting off into complacency. . . . Words keep going bankrupt and ringing false, and as you say, this wouldn't be true in painting. A "new" Revlon color doesn't invalidate a Matisse that used it fifty years earlier. Subjects date more quickly; you don't see many weeping Magdalens or meadows full of cows in the galleries nowadays, and I can't think of much celestial machinery in poetry between "The Rape of the Lock" and "Ephraim." But painters still go to museums, don't they? They've *seen* great paintings and even survived the shock. Now surely *some* of our hundred thousand living American poets have read the great poems of the Western world, and kept their minds open to the possibilities.

INTERVIEWER

Is "heroism" or "high tone" the word I want to pinpoint what's been missing from American literature these past decades? Or do those terms mean anything to you?

MERRILL

Oh, heroism's possible all right, and the high tone hasn't deserted some of us. Trouble is, our heroes more and more turn up as artists or invalids or both—the sort that won't be accepted as heroic except by fellow artists (or fellow sufferers). Sir Edmund Hillary will "do" of course, but I don't gasp at his achievement the way I do at Proust's. Must this leave the healthy, uncreative reader at a loss, not being sick or special enough to identify? Does he need to, after all? It's not as though only people in superb physical shape were thrilled by the conquest of Everest. And Proust is subtle enough to persuade us that the real feat has been one not of style but of memory, therefore within even the common man's power to duplicate. It's not the prevailing low tone so much as the imaginative laziness. We don't see life as an adventure. We know that our lives are in our hands; and far from freeing us, this knowledge has become a paralyzing weight.

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INTERVIEWER

An adventure without obvious dragons and princesses, composed merely of the flat circumstances of a given life—that's not always apparent to the naked eye.

MERRILL

No. Yet your life, and that means people and places and history along with la vie intérieure, does keep growing and blossoming, and is always *there* as potential subject-matter; but the blossom needs to be fertilized—you don't just versify your engagement book—and when that bee comes can't ever be predicted or willed.

INTERVIEWER

You'd disagree, then, with Auden, who said he was a poet *only* when actually writing a poem.

MERRILL

Lucky him. What was he the rest of the time?

INTERVIEWER

A citizen, I believe he said.

MERRILL

Oh. Well, that citizen must have heard a lot of funny sounds from the poet-pigeonhole next door. I certainly do. Whether you're at your desk or not when a poem's under way, isn't there that constant eddy in your mind? If it's strong enough all sorts of random flotsam gets drawn into it, how selectively it's hopeless to decide at the time. I try to break off, get away from the page, into the kitchen for a spell of mixing and marinating which gives the words a chance to sort themselves out behind my back. But there's really no escape, except perhaps the third drink. On "ordinary" days, days when you've nothing on the burner, it might be safe to say that you're not a poet at all: more like a doctor at a dinner party, just another guest until his hostess slumps to the floor or his little beeper goes off. Most of

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those signals are false alarms—only they're not. Language *is* your medium. You can be talking or writing a letter, and out comes an observation, a "sentence-sound" you rather like. It needn't be your own. And it's not going to make a poem, or even fit into one. But the *twinge* it gives you—and it's this, I daresay, that distinguishes you from the "citizen"—reminds you've got to be careful, that you've a condition that needs watching. . .

INTERVIEWER

Sounds like that doctor's turning into a patient.

MERRILL

Doesn't it! How about lunch?

—J. D. McClatchy

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Grass

The river irises
Draw themselves in.
Enough to have seen
Their day. The arras

Also of evening drawn,
We light up between
Earth and Venus
On the courthouse lawn,

Kept by this cheerful
Inch of green
And ten more years—fifteen?—
From disappearing.

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In the Dark

Come, try this exercise:
Focus a beam,
Emptied of thinking, outward through shut eyes
On X, your "god" of long ago.

Wherever he is now the photons race,
A phantom, unrelenting stream,

For nothing lights up. No
Sudden amused face,
No mote, no far-out figment to obstruct
The energy—
                It just spends
And spends itself, and who will ever know

Unless he felt you aim at him, and ducked

Or you before the session ends
Begin to glow

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Novelettes

1

We have settled into this resort hotel.
Our blue suite, linked to others, overlooks a lake's
Cloudless reflections. People we more or less know
Make up the clientele. Next door, for instance,
Two little girls of six, one fair, one dark,
(Summer and Winter you once called them) are at play—
Hear their shrieks of laughter. Of pain? *Of pleasure!*
The children, obscenely compliant, are being tortured
By white men dressed in black. You race for the sauna
To fetch their mother from the blinding steam.
She comes forth dripping, red as fire. What next
Happens happens in a flash. This entire wing
(In comformance to some prevailing "binary plan")
Is now a museum: walls, tables, floor to ceiling
Dense with memorabilia—wrenches, fingernails,
Theatre stubs, half-done needlework. Or rather
Not these but laser projections of the lost originals.
I move, on my cane, through crowds; it's the last day.
Concerning one exhibit, a young Eurasian
With a press card stops me: "Sir, can you tell our viewers
How much, in those old plays of yours, were the actors
paid?"
Rough figures come to mind. "So little? That's
What you called a living?" Still hoping to find you,
I hobble past. Here's a window onto a world of moonlit
Cubes and arches in ruins, populated by cats.

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2

A mesa at cloud level. Over the side, tucked far,
Far down in emerald crevices, appear
Signs of civilization. The descent is sheer,
Yet sturdy dappled ponies have been bred
For just this purpose. We dismount—we three—
To an enchantment of cobbled streets and foggy
Lantern-lit shops: an English town. From the speech,
The bonnets and coins, the cakes and tortoiseshell,
Lamia & Other Poems (three mint copies),
We deduce that nothing has changed since 1820.
We take rooms. Time stands still—and flies. Each day
New charms emerge. People are reticent
But ready, we feel, to accept us. So much so
That the blow, when it falls, stuns us. Two officers
Materialize interrogating J
Who counters, with reason, that we've shown good faith,
Asked from the start no better than to stay.
"Ah," says the tall one in a more civil tone,
Ushering us past gawking groom and barmaid
Out of the inn, " 'tis so, you three well-nigh. . .
But here are your horses." The ascent is harrowing,
Into the faceless glare and windhowl. In its course
A fan of stiffened gauze—our only proof,
M will keep laughing later, fighting back tears—
Falls from her sash, through cloud-shreds, past retrieval.

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Domino

Delicious, white, refined
Is all that I was raised to be,
Whom feeling for the word
Plus crystal rudiments of mind
Still keep—however stirred—
From wholly melting in the tea.

Far, far away, men cut
The sea-wide, sea-green fields of cane.
Often a child's lament
Filled the infested hut.
Doña Pilar flew back for Lent
—Had she been inhumane?

The better to appraise his mess,
History's health freak begs
That such as we be given up.
Outpouring bitterness
Rewards the drainer of the cup. . .
He'll miss those sparkling dregs.

Island in the Works

From air seen fathom-deep
But rising to a head—
Abscess of the abyss
Any old night letting rip
Its fires, yearlong,
As roundabout waves hiss—

Jaded by untold blue
Subversions, watered-down
Moray and Spaniard. . .

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Now to construe
In the original
Those at first arid, hard,

Soon rootfast, ramifying,
Always more fruitful
Dialogues with light.
Various dimwit under-
graduate types will wonder
At my calm height,

Vapors by then surmounted
(Merely another phase?),
And how in time I trick
Out my new "shores" and "bays"
With small craft, shrimpers'
Bars and rhetoric.

Darkly the Old Ones grumble
I'll hate all that. Hate words,
Their schooling flame?
The spice grove chatted up
By small gray knowing birds?
Myself given a name?

Waves, as your besetting
Depth-wish recedes,
I'm surfacing, I'm home!
Open the atlas. Here:
This dot, securely netted
Under the starry dome.

(Unlike this page—no sooner
Brought to the pool than wafted
Out of reach, laid flat
Face-up on cool glares, ever
So lightly swayed, or swaying . . .
Now who did that?)

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The Secret Order of Joy

Edmund White

I can't really remember how I met Tommy. I recollect him first as a smooth cloche of shiny light brown hair sporting the slender plume of a cowlick, a head bent over a book in study hall belonging to someone I'd heard was captain of the tennis team, leader of the Crowd and Sally's steady; then, without transition, he was my friend and he was struggling to explain to me his theory about Sartre's *Nausea* as we kicked our way through autumn leaves. "Uh . . . uh . . ." he was crying out on a loud, high note, a sustained nasal sound, as he stopped walking and held a finger up. Then his small, blue eyes, straining to see an idea in the distance, blinked, glanced smoothly up and down. The glitter of prophecy faded. He shrugged: "Lost it." He exposed his palms and then pocketed his hands in his trousers. I held my breath and counted ten before I offered my soft, apologetic suggestion: "But aren't you really saying that Sartre thinks Man is . . ." and I filled in the blank with the closest approximation I could invent, not of Sartre's thought but of Tommy's dubious interpretation of it.

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"That's it! That's it!" Tommy shouted, and again he excitedly waded out into the philosophical murk. I, who thought only of survival, had no interest in philosophical questions. The proximate ones were enough to obsess me, not as things I chose to contemplate but as decisions rushing up at me as out of oncoming traffic. These were the things I thought about: Am I boring Tommy? Will he mind if I rest my elbow on his shoulder? Should I powder my white bucks or keep the scuff marks? How low should I let my jeans ride?

If the ultimate questions—the meaning of life, time, being—interested me now, it was only because they interested Tommy. To the extent the other kids thought of me at all they considered me to be something of a brain; certainly in their eyes Tom was a jock. Ironic, then, that he was the one who did all the thinking, who had the taste for philosophy—ironic but predictable, since his sovereignty gave him the ease to wonder about what it all meant, whereas I had to concentrate on means, not meaning. The meaning seemed quite clear: to survive and then to become popular. The game of king and servant I'd played in the snow or sand or in cloud castles now became real. The princess, asleep for so many years, awakes to the taste of the prince's lips, a slightly sour taste; she stares up into a face visored in shadow.

In that old, comfortable suburb even the biggest mansions hunkered democratically down on the curb and sat right next to other dwellings. No concealing hedges or isolating parks could be seen anywhere. Even quite massive houses of many rooms and wings engulfed their plots right down to the sidewalk. This conspicuousness declared a pride and innocence: We have nothing to hide, and we want to show you what we've got. Tom's house was a Mediterranean villa with six bedrooms and servants' quarters over a double garage, but its gleaming leaded panes and the front door (thick oak gouged into griffins) loomed up just ten paces from the street.

Once inside that door, however, I felt transported into another society that had ways I could never quite master. The Wellingtons were nice but not charming. The Wellingtons gave thought to everything they did. They wanted no praise for

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their accomplishments; they would have found an outsider's praise impertinent. The staircase was lined with expensive, ugly paintings done from photographs of their four children. Their kids' teeth were bound in costly wires, their whims for sailboats or skis or guitars were lavishly but silently honored; they were all paraded in a stupor past the monuments of Europe, their vacations down rapids and over glaciers or up mountains were well funded—but silence reigned. No one said a word. Dinner there was torture. A student from the university served. Mr. Wellington carved. Mrs. Wellington, a woman with a girlish spirit trapped inside a large, swollen body, made stabs at conversation, but she was so shy she could speak only in comical accents. She'd grunt in a bass voice like a bear or squeak like a mouse or imitate Donald Duck—anything rather than say a simple declarative sentence in her own fragile, mortified voice. The father terrified us all with his manners (the long white hands wielding the fork and knife and expertly slicing the joint). He radiated disapproval. His disapproval was not the martyr's blackmail but a sort of murderous mildness: if he weren't so fastidious he'd murder you. We watched him carve. We were wordless, hypnotized by the candle flames, the neat incisions and deep, bloody invasions, the sound of the metal knife scraping against the tines of the fork, the sickening softness of each red slice laid to the side and the trickle down silver channels ramifying back into roots of blood.

The odd thing is that the father's spirit did not contaminate the house. His lair, the library, was even the sunniest, most relaxed room of all as the two little dogs, Welsh Corgies, trotted from couch to front door at every disturbance, their small, shaggy feet clicking on the polished red tiles. The dogs, the children, his wife—all seemed to prosper in spite of his punitive reserve, his tight, superb eyes, the way he sniffed with contempt at the end of every sentence someone else said. "Oh, yes," he said to me, examining his overly manicured hand, "I know of your mother . . . by reputation," and my heart sank.

In this house the parents maintained a silence except for the father's dreaded little comments, the sugar substitute of his sweetness, and the whole chirping menagerie of the mother's

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comical voices. No one hovered over the kids. They came and went as they chose, they stayed home and studied or they went out, they ate dinner in or at the last moment they accepted the hospitality of other tables. But under this surface ease of manner ran their dread of their father and their fear of offending him in some new way. He was a man far milder, far more (shall I say) ladylike than any other father I'd known, and yet his soft way of curling up on a couch and tucking his silk dressing gown modestly around his thin white shanks terrified everyone as did his way of looking over the tops of his glasses and mouthing without sound the name of his son: "Tommy"—the lips compressed on the double *m* and making a meal out of his swallowed, sorrowing disappointment. He was homely, tall, snowy-haired, hard-working, in bad health. He seemed to me the absolute standard of respectability, and by that standard I failed. My sister had coached me in some sort of charm, but no degree of charm, whether counterfeit or genuine, made an impression on Mr. Wellington. He was charm-proof. He disapproved of me. I was a fraud, a charlatan. His disapproval started with my mother and her "reputation," whatever that might be (her divorce? her dates? the fact she had to work?). He didn't like me and he didn't want his son to associate with me. When I entered his study I'd stand behind Tom. Only now does it occur to me that Tommy may have liked me precisely because his father didn't. Was Tom's friendship with me one more way in which he was unobtrusively but firmly disappointing his father?

Once we closed Tom's bedroom door we were immersed again in the happy shabbiness of our friendship. For he was my friend—my best friend! Until now other boys my age had frightened me. We might grab each other in the leaves and play squirrel, but those painful stabs at pleasure had left me shaken and swollen with yearning—I wanted someone to love me. I had prayed I'd grow up as fast as possible.

No longer. For the first time I found it exhilarating to be young and with someone young. I loved him, and the love was all the more powerful because I had to hide it. We slept in twin beds only two feet apart. We sat around for hours in our under-

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pants and talked about Sartre and tennis and Sally and all the other kids at school and love and God and the afterlife and infinity. Tom's mother never came to his door, as mine would have, to order us to sleep. The big dark house creaked around us as we lay on our separate beds in weird positions and talked and talked our way into the inner recesses of the night, those dim lands so tender to the couple.

And we talked of friendship, of our friendship, of how it was as intense as love, better than love, a kind of love. I told Tom my father had said friendships don't last, they wear out and must be replaced every decade as we grow older—but I reported this heresy (which I'd invented; my poor father had no friends to discard) only so that Tom and I might denounce it and pledge to each other our eternal fidelity. "Jesus," Tom said, "those guys are so damn *cynical*! Jeez . . ." He was lying on his stomach staring into the pillow; his voice was muffled. Now he propped himself up on one elbow. His forehead was red where he'd been leaning on it. His face was loose from sleepiness. His smile, too, was loose, rubbery, his gaze genial, bleary. "I mean, God! How can they go on if they think that way?" He laughed a laugh on a high brass note, a toot of amazement at the sheer gall of grown-up cynicism.

"Maybe," I said suavely, "because we're not religious, we've made friendship into our religion." I loved ringing these changes on our theme, which was ourselves, our love; to keep the subject going I could relate it to our atheism, which we'd just discovered, or to dozens of other favorite themes.

"Yeah," Tom said. He seemed intrigued by this possibility. "Hold on. Don't forget where we were." He hurried into the adjoining bathroom. As I listened through the open door to the jet of water falling into the toilet I imagined standing beside him, our streams of urine crossing, dribbling dry, then our hands continuing to shake a final glistening drop of something stickier than water from this new disturbance, this desire our lifting, meeting eyes had to confess.

No sooner would such a temptation present itself than I would smother it. The effect was of snuffing out a candle, two candles, a row of twenty, until the lens pulled back to reveal an

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entire votive stand exhaling a hundred thin lines of smoke as a terraced offering before the shrine. In this religion hidden lights had been declared superior to those that glared. Somewhere I was storing up merit, accumulating the credit I'd need to buy, one day, the salvation I longed for. Until then (and it was a reckoning that could be forestalled indefinitely, that I preferred putting off) I'd live in that happiest of all conditions: the long but seemingly prosperous courtship. It was a series of tests, ever more arduous, even perverse. For instance, I was required to deny my love in order to prove it.

"You know," Tom said one day, "you can stay over any time you like. Harold"—the minister's son, my old partner at squirrel—"warned me you'd jump me in my sleep. I have to tell you I was weirded out. You gotta forgive me. It's just I don't go in for that weird stuff."

I swallowed painfully and whispered, "Nor—" I cleared my throat and said too primly, "nor do I."

The medical smell, that Lysol smell of homosexuality, was staining the air again as the rubber-wheeled metal cart of drugs and disinfectants rolled silently by. I longed to open the window, to go away for an hour and come back to a room free of that odor, the smell of shame.

I never doubted that homosexuality was a sickness; in fact, I took it as a measure of how unsparingly objective I was that I could contemplate this very sickness. But in some other part of my mind I couldn't believe that the Lysol smell must bathe me, too, that its smell of stale coal fumes must penetrate my love for Tom. Perhaps I became so vague, so exhilarated with vagueness, precisely in order to forestall a recognition of the final term of the syllogism that begins: If one man loves another he is a homosexual; I love a man. . .

I'd heard that boys passed through a stage of homosexuality, that this stage was normal, nearly universal—then that must be what was happening to me. A stage. A prolonged stage. Soon enough this stage would revolve and as Tom's bedroom vanished, on would trundle white organdy, blue ribbons, a smiling girl opening her arms . . . but that would come later. As for now, I could continue to look as long as I liked into

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Tom's eyes the color of faded lapis beneath brows so blond they were visible only at the roots just to each side of his nose—a faint smudge turning gold as it thinned and sped out toward the temples. He was a ratty boy. He hated to shave and would let his peach fuzz go for a week or even two at a time; it grew in in clumps, full on the chin, sparse along the jaw, patchy beside the deep wicks of his mouth. His chamois-cloth shirts were all missing buttons. The gaps they left were filled in with glimpses of dingy undershirt. His jockey shorts had holes in them. Around one leg a broken elastic had popped out of the cotton seam and dangled against his thigh like a gray noodle. Since he wore a single pair of shorts for days on end the front pouch would soon be stained with yellow. He got up too late to shower before school; he'd run a hand through his fine hair but could never tame that high spume of a cowlick that tossed and bobbed above him, absurdly, gallantly.

His rattiness wore a jaunty air that redeemed everything. Faded, baggy jeans, Indian moccasins he'd owned so long the soft leather tops had taken on the shape of his toes, sunglasses repaired with Band-Aids, an ancient purple shirt bleached and aged to a dusty plum, a letter jacket with white leather sleeves and on the back white lettering against a dark blue field—these were the accoutrements of a princely pauper.

We walked beside the lake at night, a spring night. As we walked we rolled gently into each other, so that our shoulders touched with every other step. A coolness scudded in off the lake and we kept our hands in our pockets. Now Tom had leapt up onto the narrow top of a retaining wall and was scampering along it in his moccasins. Although heights terrified me I followed him. The ground on both sides fell away as we crossed a canal flowing into the lake, but I put one foot in front of the other and looked not down but at Tom's back. I prayed to a God I didn't believe in to preserve me. Soon enough I was beside Tom again and my pulse subsided: that dangerous crossing was a sacrifice I'd made to him. Our shoulders touched. As usual he was talking too loud and in his characteristic way, a sustained tenor *uh* as he collected his thoughts, then a chuckle and a rapid, throw-away sentence that came almost as an anti-

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climax. Since Tom was the most popular boy at school, many guys had imitated his halting, then rushing way of talking (as well as his grungy clothes and haphazard grooming). But I never wanted to be Tom. I wanted Tom to be Tom for me. I wanted him to hold his reedy, sinewy, scruffy maleness in trust for us both. We were heading toward a concrete pier wide enough for a truck to run down. At the far end people were fishing for smelt, illegal lanterns drawing silver schools into nets. We ambled out and watched the lights play over that dripping, squirming ore being extracted from the lake's mines. A net was dumped at my feet and I saw that cold life arc, panic, die. Tommy knew one of the old guys, who gave us a couple dozen fish, which we took back to the Wellington's place.

At midnight everyone was in bed, but Tom decided we were hungry and had to fry up our smelt right now. The odor of burning butter and bitter young fish drew Mrs. Wellington down from her little sitting room where she dozed, watched television and paged through books about gardening and thoroughbred dogs. She came blinking and padding down to the kitchen, lured by the smell of frying fish, the smell of a pleasure forbidden because it comes from a kingdom we dare not enter for long. I was certain she would be gruff—she was frowning, though only against the neon brightness of the kitchen. "What's going on here?" she asked in what must have been at last the sound of her true voice, the poor, flat intonations of the prairies where she'd grown up. Soon she was pouring out tall glasses of milk and setting places for us. She was a good sport in an unselfconscious way I'd never seen in a grown-up before, as though she and we were all part of the same society of hungry, browsing creatures instead of members of two tribes, one spontaneous and the other repressive. She seemed to bend naturally to the will of her son, and this compliance suggested an unspoken respect for the primacy of even such a young and scruffy man. My own mother paid lip service to the notion of male supremacy, but she had had to make her own way in the world too long to stay constant to such a useless, purely decorative belief.

After the midnight supper Tommy started to play the guitar

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and sing. He and I had trekked more than once downtown to the Folk Center to hear a barefoot hillbilly woman in a long, faded skirt intone Elizabethan songs and pluck at a dulcimer or to listen, frightened and transported, to a big black lesbian with a crewcut moan her basso way through the blues. The People—those brawny, smiling farmers, those plump, wholesome teens bursting out of bib overalls, those toothless ex-cons, those white-eyed dust bowl victims—the People, half glimpsed in old photos, films and WPA murals, were about to reemerge, we trusted, into history and our lives.

All this aspiration, this promise of fellowship and equality, informed Tom's songs. We worried a bit (just a bit) that we might be suburban twerps unworthy of the People. We already knew to sneer at certain folksingers for their "commercial" arrangements, their "slickness," their betrayal of the heart-rending plainness of real working folks. Although we strove in our daily lives to be as agreeable and popular as possible, to conform exactly to reigning fads, we simultaneously abhorred whatever was ingratiating. As a result we were drawn to a club where a big, scarred Negro with lots of gold jewelry and liverish eyes ruminated over a half-improvised ballad under a spotlight before a breathless, thrilled audience of sheltered white teens (overheard on the way out from the newly elected president of our United Nations club: "It makes you feel so damn phony. It even makes you Question Your Values").

Of course the best thing about folk music was that it gave me a chance to stare at Tommy while he sang. After endless false starts, after tunings and retunings and trial runs of newly or imperfectly learned strums, he'd finally accompany himself through one great ballad after another. His voice was harsh and high, his hands grubby, the nails ragged crescents of black axle-grease, and soon enough his exertions would make the faded blue workshirt cling to his back and chest in dark blue patches. Whereas when he spoke he was evasive or philosophical, certainly jokey in a tepid way, when he sang he was eloquent with passion, with the simple statement of passion. And I was, for once, allowed to stare and stare at him. Sometimes, after he fell asleep at night, I'd study the composition of grays poised on

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the pale lozenge of his pillow, those grays that constituted a face, and I'd dream he was awakening, rising to kiss me, the grays blushing with fire and warmth—but then he'd move and I'd realize that what I'd taken to be his face was in fact a fold in the sheet. I'd listen for his breath to quicken, I'd look for his sealed eyes to glint, I'd wait for his hot, strong hand to reach across the chasm between the beds to grab me—but none of that happened. There was no passion displayed between us and I never saw him show any feeling at all beyond a narrow range of teasing and joking. Except when he sang. Then he was free, that is, constrained by the ceremony of performance, the fiction that the entertainer is alone, that he is expressing grief or joy to himself alone. Tom would close his eyes and tip his head back. Squint lines would stream away from his eyes, his forehead would wrinkle, the veins would stand out along his throat and when he held a high note his whole body would tremble. One time he proudly showed me the callouses he'd earned by playing the guitar; he let me feel them. Sometimes he didn't play at all but just sounded notes as he worked something out. He had forgotten me. He thought he was alone. He'd drop the slightly foolish smile he usually wore to disarm adolescent envy or adult expectation and he looked angry and much older: I took this to be his true face. As a folksinger Tom was permitted to wail and shout and moan, and as his audience I was permitted to look at him.

His father invited me to go sailing. I accepted, although I warned him I was familiar only with powerboats and had had no experience as a crew member. Everything about dressing the ship—unshrouding and raising the sails, lowering the keel, installing the rudder, untangling the sheets—confused me. I knew I was in the way and I stood, one hand on the boom, and tried to inhale myself into nonexistence. I heard Mr. Wellington's quick sharp breaths as reproaches.

The day was beautiful, a cold, constant spring wind swept past us, high towers of clouds were rolling steadily closer like medieval war machines breaching the blue fortress of sky. Light spilled down out of the clouds onto the choppy lake, gray and cold and faceted, in constant motion but going nowhere.

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Hundreds of boats were already out, their sails pivoting and flashing in the shifting beams of sunlight. A gull's wings dropped like the slowly closing legs of a draftsman's compass.

At last we were underway. Mr. Wellington, unlike my father, was a smooth, competent sailor. He pulled the boat around so that the wind was behind us and he asked me to attach the spinnaker pole to the jib sail, but I became frightened when I had to lean out over the coursing water and Tommy filled in for me, not vexed at me but I suspect worried about what his father would think. And what was I afraid of? Falling in? But I could swim, a rope could be tossed my way. That wasn't it. Even my vertigo I had overcome on the sea wall for Tom's sake. It was, I'm sure, Mr. Wellington's disapproval I feared and invited, that disapproval which, so persistent, had ended by becoming a manner, a way of being, like someone's way of holding his head to one side, something familiar, something I would miss if it were absent. Not that he bestowed his disapproval generously on me. No, even that he withheld and dispensed in only the smallest sums.

The wind blew higher and higher and Mr. Wellington, who'd taken in sail, was holding close to it. We gripped the gunwhales and leaned back out over the cold, running waves, the water brushing, then soaking, the backs of our shirts. The sun solemnly withdrew into its tent of cloud, disappointed with the world. By the slightest turn of my head I could change the moan of the wind into a whistle. There we were, just a father and his teenage son and the son's friend out for a sail, but in my mind, at least, the story was less simple. For I found in this Mr. Wellington a version of myself so transformed by will and practice as to be not easily recognizable, but familiar nonetheless. In him I sensed someone as unloved and unlovely as I felt myself to be. He wasn't handsome now nor had he ever been, I was certain, and his lack of romantic appeal shaded his responses to his glamorous son, the muted, wary adoration as well as the less than frank envy.

I'd begun to shiver. The day was turning darker and had blown all the birds out of the sky and half the boats back to harbor. I was huddling, hugging myself down in the hull, wet

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back to the wind. Mr. Wellington was letting out sail—the tock-tock-tock of the winch releasing the mainsheet—and he was looking at me, holding his judgment in reserve. Between us, these two tight minds, flew the great sail and Tom inhabiting it as he leaned back into it, pushing it, pushing until we came around, he ducked and the boom swung overhead and stopped with a shocking thud. Here was this boy, laughing and blonded by the sun and smooth-skinned, his whole body straining up as he reached to cleat something so that his t-shirt parted company with his dirty, sagging jeans and we—the father and I—could see Tom's muscles like forked lightning on his taut stomach; here was this boy so handsome and free and well-liked and here were we flanking him, looking up at him, at his torso flowering out of the humble calyx of his jeans.

It seemed to me then that beauty is the highest good, the one thing we all want to be or have or failing that destroy, and that all the world's virtues are nothing but the world's spleen and deceit. The ugly, the old, the rich and the accomplished speak of invisible merits—of character and wisdom and power and skill—because they lack the visible ones, that ridiculous down under the lower lip that can't decide to be a beard, those prehensile bare feet racing down the sleek deck, big hands too heavy for slender arms, the sweep of lashes over faded lapis-lazuli eyes, lips deep red, the windblown hair intricate as Velasquez's rendering of lace.

One fall evening Tom called me to ask me if I'd like to go out on a double date. He'd be with Sally, of course, and I'd be with Helen Paper. Just a movie. Maybe a burger afterwards. Not too late. School tomorrow. Her regular date had come down with a cold.

I said sure.

I dashed down the hall to tell my mother, who in a rare domestic moment had a sewing basket on her lap. Her glasses had slid down to the tip of her nose and her voice came out slow and without inflection as she tried to thread a needle.

"Guess what!" I shouted.

"What, dear?" She licked the thread and tried again.

"That was Tom and he's arranged a date for me with Helen

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Paper, who's the most beautiful and sophisticated girl in the whole school."

"Sophisticated?" There, the thread had gone through.

"Yes, yes"—I could hear my voice rising higher and higher; somehow I had to convey the excitement of my prospect—"she's only a freshman but she goes out with college boys and everything and she's been to Europe and she's—well, the other girls say top-heavy but only out of sour grapes. And she's the leader of the Crowd or could be if she cared and didn't have such a reputation."

My mother was intent upon her sewing. She was dressed to go out and this, yes, it must be a rip in the seam of her raincoat; once she'd fixed it she'd be on her way. "Wonderful, dear."

"But isn't it exciting?" I insisted.

"Well, yes, but I hope she's not too fast."

"For me?"

"For anyone. In general. There, now." My mother bit the thread off, her eyes suddenly as wide and empty and intelligent as a cat's. She stood, examined her handiwork, put the coat on, moved to the door, backtracked, lifted her cheek toward me to peck. "I hope you have fun. You seem terribly nervous. Just look at your hands. You're wringing them—never saw anyone literally wring his hands before."

"Well, it's terribly exciting," I said in wild despair.

My sister wasn't home so I was alone once my mother had gone—alone to take my second bath of the day in the mean, withholding afternoon light permeating the frosted glass window and to listen to the listless hum of traffic outside, in such contrast to my heart's anticipation. It was as though the very intensity of my feeling had drained the surroundings of significance. I was the unique center of consciousness, its toxic concentration.

I was going out on a date with Helen Paper and I had to calm myself by then because the evening would surely be quicksilver small talk and ten different kinds of smile and there would be hands linking and parting as, in a square dance, you had to be very subtle to hear the calls, subtle and calm. I wanted so badly to be popular, to have the others look back as I ran to catch up,

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then walk with my left hand around his waist, the right around hers, her long hair blown back on my shoulder, pooling there for a moment in festive intimacy, a sort of gold epaulette of the secret order of joy.

Helen Paper had a wide, regal forehead, straight dark hair pulled back from her face, curiously narrow hips and strong, thin legs. What she was famous for were the great globes of her breasts which were as evident as her smile and almost as easy to acknowledge and so heavy that her shoulders had become very strong. How her breasts hung naturally I had no way of knowing since in her surgically sturdy brassiere her form had been idealized into—well, two uncannily symmetrical globes, at once proud, inviting and (by virtue of their symmetry) respectable.

But to describe her without mentioning her face would be absurd since everyone was dazzled by those fine blue eyes, harder or perhaps less informative than one would have anticipated, and by that nose, so straight and Hellenic, joined to the forehead without a bump or transition of any sort, the nose a prayer ascending above the altar of lips so rich and sweet that one could understand how men had once regarded women as spoils in wars worth fighting for. She was a woman (for she surely seemed a woman despite her youth) supremely confident of her own appeal, of her status as someone desirable in the abstract—that is, attractive and practicable to anyone under any conditions at any time, rather than in the concrete, to me now as mine. She wasn't shy or passive, but to the extent she was a vessel she was full to the brim with the knowledge that she represented a prize. She was a custodian of her own beauty.

Her custodial role made her elusive, a self seen through smoke. She did seem to be looking at me through smoke, its irregular updraft rearranging her face, lifting and enlarging a detail for a moment before letting it catch up with itself, reintegrate with the rest, smokey arabesques turning silver in the backlight as she turned halfway and her profile went dark, the only touch of brilliance on her lip.

Our date was quick, unremarkable (it's the curse of adolescence that its events are never adequate to the feelings they

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inspire, that no unadorned retelling of those events can suggest the feelings). Tommy's mother collected us all in her car (we were still too young to drive) and deposited us at the theater. Green spotlights buried in fake ferns in the lobby played on a marble fountain that had long since been drained. The basin was filled with candy wrappers and paper napkins. Inside, behind padded doors each pierced by a grimy porthole, soared the dark splendors of the theater brushed here and there by the ushers' traveling red flashlights or feebly, briefly dispelled by the glow of a match held to a forbidden cigarette. The ceiling had been designed to resemble the night sky, the stars were minute bulbs, the moon a yellow crescent. To either side of the screen was a windswept version of a royal box, a gilt throne on a small carpeted dais under a great blown-back stucco curtain topped by a papier-mâché coronet. When I finally held Helen Paper's hand after sitting beside her for half an hour in the dark, I said to myself, "This hand could be insured for a million dollars." She surrendered her hand to me, but was I really a likely candidate for it? Was this the way guys became popular? Did certain girls have the guts to tell everyone else, "Look, be nice to this guy. He's not a nerd. He's worth it. He's special?" Or was this date merely some extraordinary favor wrangled for me by Tommy, something that would not be repeated? Could it be (and I knew it could) that the star chamber of popularity was sealed and that no one would be admitted to it—no one except some casual new prince who belonged there? Tommy was a prince. He had a knack for demanding attention; even when he called the telephone operator for a number he'd hold her in conversation. Once he even talked her into meeting him after work. The receptionists in offices downtown, salesladies in stores, the mothers of friends—all of them he sized up, mentally undressed, and though this appraisal might seem to be rude, in fact most women liked it. An efficient woman would be sailing past him. He'd grab her wrist. He'd apologize for the intrusion, but he'd also stand very close to her and his smile wouldn't apologize for a thing. And she, at exactly the moment I would have expected outrage, would flush, her eyes would flutter, not in an experi-

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enced way but meltingly, since he'd touched a nerve, since he'd found a way to subvert the social into the sexual—and then she'd smile and rephrase what she was saying in a voice charmingly without conviction.

After the movie we went somewhere for a snack and then I walked Helen home. Her beauty stood between us like an enemy, some sort of hereditary enemy I was supposed to fear, but I liked her well enough. Even the fiercest lovers must like each other at least once in a while. The trees arching above the deserted suburban streets tracked slowly past overhead, their crowns dark against a hazy white night sky, clouds lit up like internal organs dyed for examination, for augury . . . I spoke quietly, deliberately to Helen Paper and I snatched glances of her famous smile rising to greet my words. Our attention wasn't given over to words but to the formal charting of that night street that we were executing. I mean we, or rather our bodies, the animal sense in us, some orienting device—we were discovering each other, and for one moment I felt exultantly worthy of her. For she did have the power to make me seem interesting, at least to myself. I found myself talking faster and with more confidence as we approached the wide, dimly lit porch of her house. Some late roses perfumed the night. A sprinkler someone had left on by mistake played back and forth over the grass. A sudden breeze snatched up the spray and flung it on the walkway ahead, a momentary darkening of the white pavement. Inside, upstairs, a room was just barely lit behind a drawn curtain. Crickets took the night's pulse. Although I said something right out of dancing school to Helen—"Good night, it's been great to spend some time with you"—an unexpected understanding had fallen on us. Of course her allure—the sudden rise and fall of her wonderful soft breasts, the dilation of her perfume on the cool night air, the smile of a saint who points, salaciously, toward Heaven—this allure had seduced me entirely. I loved her. I didn't know what to do with her. I suspected another, more normal boy would have known how to tease her, to make her laugh, would have treated her more as a friend and less as an idol. Had I been expected to do something I would have fled, but now,

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tonight, I did love her, as one might love a painting one admired but didn't, couldn't, wouldn't own. She was completely relaxed when she took my hand and looked in my eyes, as she thanked me and bobbed a curtsy in a little-girl manner other men, I'm sure, liked better than I; sensing my resistance to anything fetching, she doubled back and intensified her gravity. By which I'm not suggesting she was playing a part. In fact, I don't know what she was doing. Because I loved her she was opaque to me, and her sincerity I doubted not at all until I doubted it completely.

I thanked her and said I hoped I'd see her soon. For a moment it seemed as though it would be the most natural thing to kiss her on those full, soft lips (had I not seen her a moment ago covertly pop some scented thing into her mouth to prepare for just such an inevitability?). Her eyes were veiled with awareness of her own beauty. I suppose I suddenly liked myself and I could see a light in which I'd be plausible to others. My love for Tommy was shameful, something I was also proud of but tried to hide. This moment with Helen—our tallness on the moon-lashed porch, the coolness that sent black clouds (lit by gold from within) caravelling past a pirate moon, a coolness that glided through opening fingers that now touched, linked, squeezed, slowly drew apart—this moment made me happy. Hopeful. An oppression had been lifted. A long apprenticeship to danger had abruptly ended.

After I left her I raced home through the deserted streets laughing and leaping. I sang show tunes and danced and felt as fully alive as someone in a movie (since it was precisely life that was grainy and sepia-tinted, whereas the movies had the audible ping, the habitable color, the embraceable presence of reality). I was more than ready to give up my attraction to men for this marriage to Helen Paper. At last the homosexual phase of my adolescence had drawn to a close. To be sure, I'd continue to love Tommy but as he loved me: fraternally. In my dream the stowaway in the single bunk with me, whom I was trying to keep hidden under a blanket, had miraculously transformed himself into my glorious bride, as the kissed leper in the legend becomes the Christ Pantocrator.

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When I got home my mother was in bed with the lights out. "Honey?"

"Yes?"

"Come in and talk to me."

"Okay," I said.

"Rub my back, okay?"

"Okay," I said. I sat beside her on the bed. She smelled of bourbon.

"How was your date?"

"Terrific! I never had such a good time."

"How nice. Is she a nice girl?"

"Better than that. She's charming and sophisticated and intelligent."

"You're home earlier than I expected. Not so hard. Rub gently. You bruiser. I'm going to call you that: Bruiser. Is she playful? Is she like me? Does she say cute things?"

"No, thank God."

"Why do you say that? Is she some sort of egghead?"

"Not an egghead. But she's dignified. She's straightforward. She says what she means."

"I think girls should be playful. That doesn't mean dishonest. I'm playful."

"—"

"Well, I am. Do you think she likes you?"

"How can I tell? It was just a first date." My fingers lightly stroked her neck to either side of her spine. "I doubt if she'll want to see me again. Why should she?"

"But why not? You're handsome and intelligent."

"Handsome! With these big nostrils!"

"Oh, that's just your sister. She's so frustrated she has to pick on you. There's nothing wrong with your nostrils. At least I don't see anything wrong. Of course I know you too well. If you like, we could consult a nose doctor." A long pause. "Nostrils . . . do people generally dwell on them? I mean, do people think about them a lot?" Small, high voice: "Are mine okay?"

A hopeless silence.

At last she began to snore delicately and I hurried to my own room. My sister's door, next to mine, was closed but her light

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was burning resentfully.

And I gave myself over to my reverie. I had a record player I'd paid for myself by working as a caddy and records I exchanged each week at the library, the music an outpost of my father's influence in this unmusical female territory.

I slipped out of my clothes as quickly as possible, though I tried to do everything beautifully, as in a movie of my life with Helen. In some way I felt it was already being filmed—not that I looked for hidden cameras but I simplified and smoothed out my movements for the lens. Every detail of my room asked me to be solicitous. When the dresser drawer stuck I winced—this sequence would have to be reshot. I turned my sheets down as though she, Helen, were at my side. I rushed to snap off the lights. She and I lay side by side in the narrow boat and floated downstream. The stars moved not at all and only the occasional fluttering of a branch overhead or the sound of a scraping rock below suggested our passage. By dawn I'd made love to Helen four times. The first time was so ceremonial I had a problem molding the mist into arms and legs; all that kept flickering up at me was her smile. The second time was more passionate. I was finally able to free her breasts from their binding. By the third time we'd become gently fraternal; we smiled with tired kindness at each other. We were very intimate. At dawn she began to disintegrate. The sickening certainty of day pulsed into being and all my exertions were able to keep her at my side only a few more moments. At last she fled.

I stumbled from class to class in a numb haze. Strangely enough, I was afraid I'd run into Helen. I didn't feel up to her. I was too tired. In homeroom I yawned, rested my head on my desk and longed for the privacy of my bed and the saving grace of night. I wanted to be alone with my wraith. In my confusion the real Helen Paper seemed irrelevant, even intrusive.

That night I wrote her a letter. I chose a special yellow parchment paper, a spidery pen point and black ink. In gym class as I'd stumbled through calisthenics and in study hall as I'd half-dozed behind a stack of books, phrases for the letter had dropped into my mind. Now I sat down with great formality at my desk and composed the missive, first in pencil on scratch

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paper. I offered her my love and allegiance while admitting I knew how unworthy of her I was. And yet I had half a notion that though I might be worthless as a date (not handsome enough) I might be of some value as a husband (intelligent, successful). In marriage, merits outweighed appeal, and I could imagine nothing less eternal than marriage with Helen. But I mentioned marriage only once in the letter.

A week went by before I received her answer. Twice I saw her in the halls. The first time she came over to me and looked me in the eye and smiled her sweet, intense smile. She was wearing a powder-blue cashmere sweater and her breasts rose and fell monumentally as she asked me in her soft drawl how I was doing. Nothing in her smile or voice suggested a verdict either for or against me. I felt there was something improper about seeing her at all before I got her letter. I mumbled, "Fine," blushed and slunk off. I felt tall and dirty. I was avoiding Tommy as well. Soon enough I would have to tell him about my proposal to Helen, which I suspected he'd disapprove of as a ridiculously false and fruitless move.

Then one afternoon, a Friday after school, there was her letter to me in the mailbox. Even before I opened it I was mildly grateful she had at least answered me. At least she'd spared me the indignity of acting as though she had never heard from me.

The apartment was empty. I went to the sun room and looked across the street at the lake churning like old machinery in a deserted amusement park, rides without riders. My mind kept two separate sets of books. In one I was fortunate she'd taken the time to write me even this rejection, more than a creep like me deserved. In the other she said, "You're not the person I would have chosen for a date nor for a summer or semester but yes, I will marry you. Nor do I want anything less from you. Romance is an expectation of an ideal life to come, and in that sense my feelings for you are romantic."

If someone had made me guess which reply I'd find inside the envelope, I would have chosen the rejection since pessimism is always accurate, but acceptance would not have shocked me, since I also believed in the miraculous.

I poured myself a glass of milk in the kitchen and returned to

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the sun room. Her handwriting was well-formed and rounded, the dots over the *i*'s, circles, the letters fatter than tall, the lines so straight I suspected she had placed the thin paper over a ruled-off grid. The ordinariness, the schoolgirl ordinariness of her hand frightened me—I didn't feel safe in such an ordinary hand. "I like you very much as a friend," she wrote. "I was pleased and surprised to receive your lovely letter. It was one of the sweetest tributes to me I have ever had from anyone. I know this will hurt, but I am forced to say it if I am to prevent you further pain. I do not love you and I never have. Our friendship has been a matter of mutual and rewarding liking, not loving. I know this is very cruel, but I must say it. Try not to hate me. I think it would be best if we did not see each other for a while. I certainly hope we can continue to be friends. I consider you to be one of my very best friends. Please, please forgive me. Try to understand why I have to be this way. Sincerely, Helen."

Well, her phrasing was less childish than her hand, I thought, as though the letter were a composition in class that concerned me in no way. Even as this attitude broke over me, but before I was drawn into another more dangerous one, I had time to notice she said I was one of her very best friends, an honor I'd been unaware of until now—as who had not: I registered the social gain before the romantic loss. Unless (and here I could taste something bitter on the back of my tongue) —unless the "mature" advice ("I think it would be best if we did not see each other for a while") was actually a denial of the consolation prize, a way of keeping me out of her circle at the very moment she was pretending to invite me into it. Could it be that the entire exercise, its assured tone, the concision and familiar ring of the phrasing, figured as nothing more than a "tribute" (her word) she had piled up before the altar of her own beauty? How many people had she shown my letter to?

But then all this mental chatter stopped and I surrendered to something else, something less active, more abiding, something that had been waiting politely all this time but that now stepped forward, diffident yet impersonal: my grief.

For the next few months I grieved. I would stay up all night crying and playing records and writing sonnets to Helen. What

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was I crying for? I cried during gym class when someone got mad at me for dropping the basketball. In the past I would have hidden my pain but now I just slowly walked off the court, the tears spurting out of my face. I took a shower, still crying, and dressed forlornly and walked the empty halls even though to do so during class time was forbidden. I no longer cared about rules. I let my hair grow, I stopped combing it, I forgot to change my shirt from one week to the next. With a disabused eye I watched other kids striving to succeed, to become popular. I became a sort of vagabond of grief or, as I'd rather put it, I entered grief's vagabondage, which better suggests a simultaneous freedom and slavery. Freedom from the now meaningless pursuit of grades, friends, smiles; slavery to a hopeless love.

Every afternoon I'd stumble home exhausted to my room, but once there my real work would begin, which was to imagine Helen in my arms, Helen beside me laughing, Helen looking up at me through the lace suspended from the orange-blossom chaplet, Helen with other boys, kissing them, unzipping her shorts and stepping out of them, pushing her hair back out of her serious, avid eyes. She was a puppet I could place in one playlet after another, but once I'd invoked her she became independent, tortured me, smiled right through me at another boy, her approaching lover. Her exertions with other men fascinated me and the longer I suffered, the more outrageous were the humiliations I had other men inflict on her.

Yet what I felt most often was not bitter lust but pain and a fascination with insanity that was at once frightening and soothing. I knew I was drifting farther and farther out to sea. I was losing weight. I'd torn up my phone list. When other people said hi to me in the halls I stared right through them, my face a Ku Klux Klan sheet with burning holes for eyes—or I smiled with weary compassion at these antics. Paul Valéry, or rather his narrator, writes of Monsieur Teste: "When he spoke he never raised an arm or a finger—he had *killed his puppet*." I felt I'd killed mine, that I was no longer routinely producing gestures, that I was old and thoroughly disenchanted. Other people's ambitions struck me as ludicrous and I'd look for a

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smile, the hint of the co-conspirator, behind their zealous faces. Surely we all knew we were in a ridiculous game, that if we kept playing it we did so only as a frivolous alternative to suicide.

I became ill with mononucleosis, ironically the "kissing disease" that afflicted so many teenagers in those days. I was kept out of school for several months. Most of the time I slept, feverish and content: exempted. Just to cross the room required all my energy. Whether or not to drink another glass of ginger ale could absorb my attention for an hour. That my grief had been superseded by illness relieved me; I was no longer willfully self-destructive. I was simply ill. Love was forbidden. My doctor had told me I mustn't kiss anyone. Helen had been spared. I had been absolved. Tommy called me from time to time but I felt he and I had nothing in common now—after all, he was just a boy, whereas I'd become a very old man.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

T. Coraghessan Boyle is the author of *Descent of Man* and *Water Music*, both published by Atlantic/Little, Brown. His stories have appeared in *The Atlantic, Harpers, Penthouse, Antaeus*, and other magazines. He lives in California.

William Ferguson teaches Spanish at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts and is co-owner (with Nancy King) of the Metacom Press. His work has appeared in *The Mississippi Review, Canto, Calliope*, and other magazines.

Norman Rush is currently completing a tour of duty as director of the Peace Corps in Botswana. His stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Massachusetts Review, Best American Short Stories*, edited by Martha Foley, and in other anthologies.

Edmund White's "The Secret Order of Joy" is a condensed version of a chapter in his novel *A Boy's Own Story*, to be published by Dutton in October. Mr. White teaches writing at Columbia University. He has written two other novels.

POETRY

George Bradley's poems often appear in these pages. He lives in Brooklyn, New York and in Sagaponack, Long Island.

Michel Deguy, who was born in 1930, is the author of several books, most recently *Donnant donnant*. He teaches at the University of Paris and directs the magazine *Revue de poésie*.

Raymond Federman, Deguy's translator, teaches at S.U.N.Y Buffalo.

Tom Disch, novelist and poet, lives in New York City.

Charles Fowler, a graduate of Kenyon College, lives in west central Minnesota.

Mark Halliday teaches at Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

Daniel Halpern's new collection of poems, *Seasonal Rights*, will be published by Viking this fall.

Adam LeFevre lives in New York City.

David Lehman teaches at Hamilton College in New York State.

James Merrill was born in New York City. He has written novels and plays as well as the poetry for which he has received two National Book Awards, a Pulitzer Prize and the Bollinger Award. Later this summer, Atheneum will publish *From the First Nine* (Poems 1946–1976) and *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

John Morgan's first collection, *The Bone-Duster*, was recently published in *The Quarterly Review of Literature Poetry Series*. Last year he held a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. He teaches at the University of Alaska.

Lisel Mueller won an American Book Award in 1981.

Robert Phillips' third collection of poems, *Running on Empty*, was published by Doubleday in spring,1981.

Wendy Salinger is the author of *Folly River*, published by Dutton in the American Poetry Series.

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Stephen Sandy is the author of *Stresses in the Peaceable Kingdom* and *Roofs*, both from Houghton Mifflin. His most recent collection is *The Hawthorne Effect*, Tansy Poetry Series, 1980. He directs the Bennington Summer Poetry Workshop.
Hugh Seidman's third book of poems, *THRONE/FALCON/EYE*, will be published by Random House this fall. He lives in New York City.
Harvey Shapiro's latest collection, *Lauds*, was published by Sun Books.
Charles Simic teaches at the University of New Hampshire. His latest collection of poems is *Classic Ballroom Dances* (Braziller).

INTERVIEWS

J.D. McClatchy has published a collection of poems, *Scenes From Another Life* (Braziller, 1981). He teaches at Princeton.
Robert Phillips' interviews with William Goyen and Joyce Carol Oates have appeared in *The Paris Review* previously. He is the author of ten published books of poetry, fiction and criticism.

ART

Jennifer Bartlett was born in Long Beach, California, in 1941, and currently lives in New York. Her work has been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and in a recent one-woman exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. A book of the "In the Garden" drawings will be published by Harry N. Abrams in the fall.
Jedd Garet was born in Los Angeles in 1955 and lives in New York. His paintings have been included in recent exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Jenny Holzer and **Peter Nadin** live in New York. Their collaborative works have been exhibited in Paris, Munich, and Berlin, and recently at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.
William T. Wiley was born in Bedford, Indiana, in 1937, and lives in Marin County, California. He has had numerous exhibitions of paintings, drawings, and prints, including one-man exhibitions at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York, and Hansen Fuller Goldeen Gallery, San Francisco.
Joe Zucker was born in Chicago in 1941, and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited internationally, including recent one-man exhibitions at La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and Holly Solomon Gallery, New York.

FEATURE

Roy Winnick coauthored the third volume of Lawrance Thompson's biography of Robert Frost. In addition to editing the MacLeish letters, he is preparing an authorized biography of Archibald MacLeish. He lives in Princeton and works in New York City.

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NOTICE

Those who in the spring of 1953 chose to buy the first issue of The Paris Review *paid 75 cents for it. It had 120 pages (including three of advertising) featuring the work of Peter Matthiessen, Terry Southern, George Steiner, and Robert Bly, among others, and an interview on the craft of writing with E.M. Forster. A single copy of that first issue is now worth, I am told, well over $200—thus a financial as well as intellectual investment for those early readers if they thought to keep the issue on their shelves. Since then a number of price hikes have been enacted, largely to keep apace of production costs. Now, alas, there is another—to five dollars. Actually, the price is not only comparable to those of our literary-magazine brethren, but could be a bargain as well: the present-day issues are over twice as lengthy as the first numbers. An actuarial assessment would suggest that the true cost is about the same as it was. And furthermore, there is always the thought that the worth of the magazine, like that of good wines, is increasing as time goes by. Subscription prices have been raised as well. The practical will note that a subscription saves 20% off the bookstall price. Whichever means one uses to obtain a copy, it should be remembered that if the value of an issue increases as it has in the past, this magazine that you hold in your hand could around the turn of the century be worth $1300. It is doubtful, but on that off-chance I think I'll lay in some myself.*

G.A.P.

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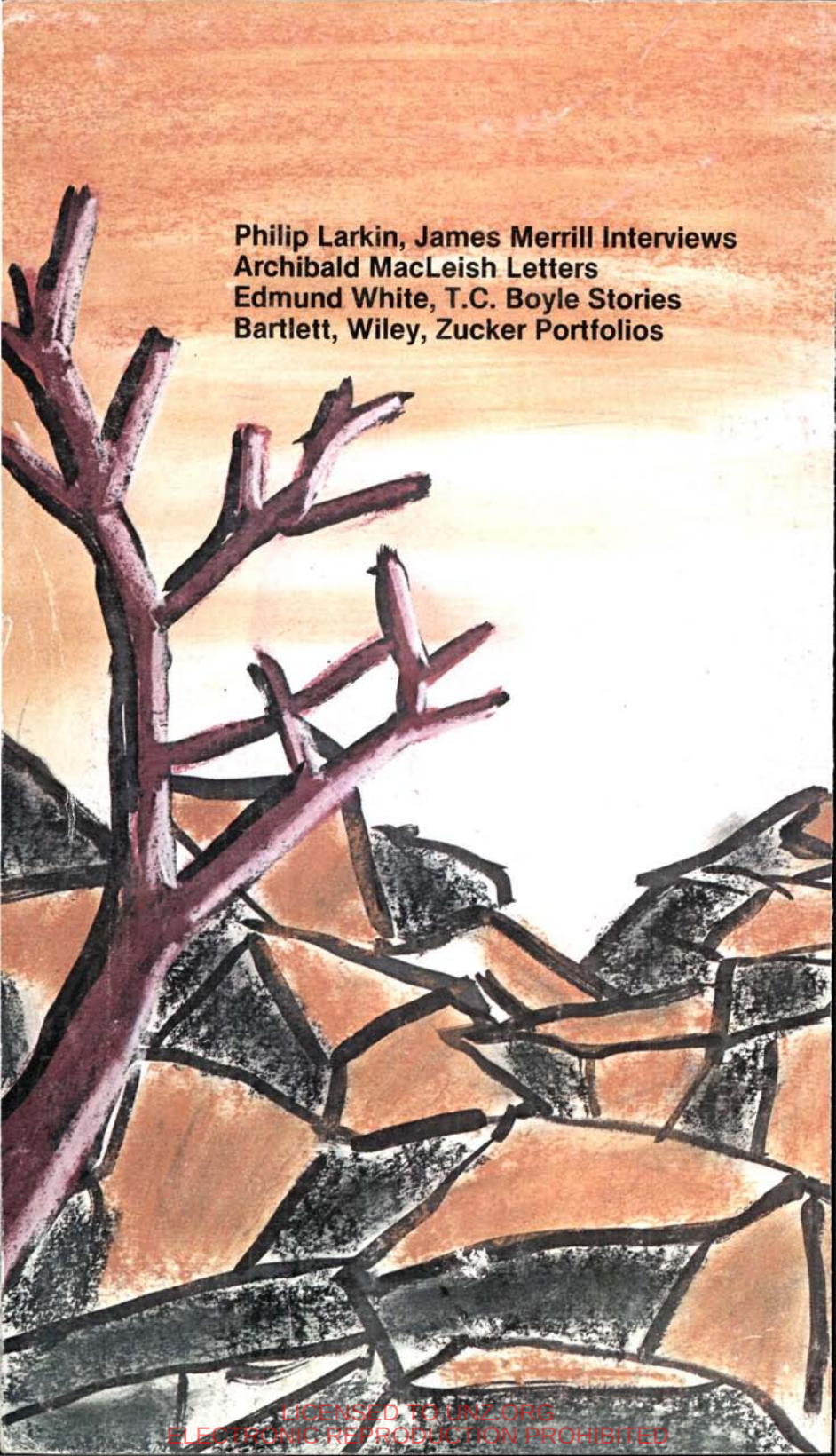

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